

**Towards a theological framework for
United Reformed Church ministry
in the twenty-first century.**

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Kathryn M Price

School of History, Archaeology and Religion

University of Cardiff

Summary

This thesis attempts to construct a theological framework for ministry in the United Reformed Church that is provisional - able to move with the times, based on the traditions that were foundational for the denomination, inclusive of all ministry, lay and ordained, and rooted in the actual practice of ministers now.

Chapter Two declares this a work of practical theology and creates a bespoke methodology that has as its framework an amalgam of the pastoral cycle and Appreciative Inquiry. The tools used include literature review, ethnography, contextual Bible study and grounded theory to construct as accurate a picture of ministry in the URC as possible, so as to identify the issues that concern the church at this time.

Chapters Three and Four explore first the official written side of the picture, reading both primary and secondary source texts from the history of the Reformation, through the formation of the URC in the fourth quarter of the 20th century, to reports and statistics up to the present day. Then the local reflective voices of practising ministers are heard through paired conversations and contextual Bible studies.

Chapter Five places these two halves of the picture in dialogue, listening for both agreement and dissonance, in order to make it both complete and realistic. Along the way a secondary aim emerges - that of finding an ecclesiological way to move the conversation on to a resolution.

In Chapter Six, Provocative Propositions build on the critical dialogue to posit a different, but possible future for ministry and construct a new theological framework. These Propositions form the basis of conclusions drawn in Chapter Seven, that goes on to pose questions for future study. What emerges is a hopeful prospect, practicable, theologically underpinned and faithful to the Reformed tradition.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Aim and purpose

The initial aim of this work was to create a contemporary framework for all ministry across the United Reformed Church: a framework that is theologically coherent, Biblically literate, culturally relevant and practical. There is a mismatch between the popular understanding – in the church and beyond – of what a minister is, between the existing theological statements and the reality lived and witnessed by many ‘ministers’ who do not conform to the norm of one minister serving one church, or even a small group of churches. Ministers are working as chaplains, church officers, teachers, in supervision roles and more. In addition, there are other recognised ministries in the various manifestations of the diaconate – Church Related Community Workers (United Reformed Church), deacons (Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans), youth workers, lay preachers and readers, and so on. To complicate matters further, the United Reformed Church ordains elders to a specific local ministry and all the Reformed churches proclaim the priesthood of all believers and promote ‘every member ministry’.

The current theology of ministry, which ignores all this is in need of revision. That document was attached as an appendix to an interim report to General Assembly in 1994, entitled *Patterns of Ministry* and is still reproduced in a current course for ordinands¹. It does acknowledge the position of elders and list other recognised ministries, such as Church Related Community Workers, lay preachers, youth workers and such, but its main focus is on ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament with particular reference to ecumenical documents² and only minimally to Scripture. Nor is this proposed theological framework likely to be a once-

¹ *An Introductory Course on the United Reformed Church: worship, structure, history, ministry* current edition April 2016. All those accepted as ordinands for Ministry of Word and Sacrament are required to complete this course locally before beginning their training at theological college.

² *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* – Faith and Order Paper no. 111, World Council of Churches, Geneva 1982; *God’s Reign and our Unity*, the Report of the Anglican-Reformed International Commission, London & Edinburgh 1982

and-for-all exercise as the church's life and world is in a period of rapid transition. The ever-present challenge of demographic change – falling rolls, an increasing age profile, growing ethnic diversity – coupled with a raft of innovations, including pioneer ministry and fresh expressions of church will inevitably impact on both the theory/theology and praxis of all denominations.

The aim of this research, therefore, is to construct a theology of ministry that is contemporary, provisional, inclusive and practical. It will draw on the traditional construction of theology – scripture, tradition, reason & experience – giving due weight to each, whilst especially reading scripture and tradition in the light of contemporary experience. It is not intended to be definitive, because, as previously stated, the times in the church are a-changing, but it will seek to provide a flexible framework within which new contexts can find something useful on which to build their own theology. It will encompass the whole of ministry – lay & ordained, stipendiary & self-financed, in the church & in the secular world. The sphere of investigation will be primarily the United Reformed Church. The intention is for this work to be a useful tool as the Church grapples with its present situation and into the future.

The current theological understanding of ministry is based on the three-fold model introduced in the Pauline pastoral epistles – *episcopus*, *presbyteros*, *diaconos*. Across the denominations, these three terms have been translated differently into English and transformed into quite different structures, but the elements of oversight, leadership and service are still discernible and almost universally employed. The World Council of Churches in 2013 issued a Faith and Order paper, entitled '*The Church: Towards a Common Vision*' in which it revisited some of the issues addressed in '*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*' in 1982 and asked questions of its member churches. In its response the United Reformed Church took a generally positive approach, as befitted its ecumenical commitment. Regarding the three-fold ministry, however, in responding to a question as to whether there might be an achievable consensus, the URC was more cautious, stating that 'In the URC we do not normally use the language of

the threefold ministry (*General Assembly report, 2016, p115*), pointing out the difference in understanding of ‘priest’ and ‘minister’ in the Anglican and Reformed traditions. It is, in any case, debatable how appropriate a model, developed in the period of growth and development of the early centuries after Christ, is today, when the prevailing talk is of decline. The adoption of Christianity by the Roman empire contributed to the building up of the institutional church and this model persisted through the various doctrinal splits – East and West, Catholic and Protestant and further. The present position of the church in the West, popularly seen³ as a declining institution in a multi-cultural, multi-faith environment needs a different approach. It may well be that turning to other Biblical texts will suggest a way forward.

The relationship between membership, discipleship and ministry is one that is now the impetus behind the URC’s new focus on missional discipleship, called *Walking the Way – living the life of Jesus today*. This would seem crucial when Reformed ecclesiology created the concept of the priesthood of all believers, based on 1 Peter 2.9 – “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light “(NRSV) - and there is much contemporary emphasis on every member having a ministry. The English language is not always as helpful in this as it might be – a sentiment I will return to!

1.2 Research questions

The current crisis in ministry in the United Reformed Church raises a number of questions. I use the word ‘crisis’ intentionally. Etymologically it comes from the Greek word for ‘decision’ – *krisis* – and historically has been used to denote a turning point, particularly in disease, as well as a time of difficulty or distress. To designate something as a crisis, then, is to identify a time of change, which this most certainly is. One source of this

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/07/church-in-crisis-as-only-2-of-young-adults-identify-as-c-of-e> [accessed 1.06.2019]

crisis has arisen from the URC's original commitment to provide ministry to every congregation. By ministry, the *Basis of Union*, the foundational document of the Church, means the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. However, the fall in membership over the past forty-seven years, an experience shared with other mainstream denominations, has led to a comparable fall in income, leading to a reduction in the number of stipendiary Ministers that can be afforded. However, the number of local churches has not declined at the same rate, which means that a Minister now will have to serve anything from two to six, and in some cases more, congregations, leading to an increased dependence on elders, lay preachers and others. This change in the style of ministry, where the close pastoral relationship that used to exist between Minister and congregation is stretched beyond practicality⁴, has caused both stress in Ministers and disappointment and disillusionment in church members, who in many ways have been deskilled, or rather disempowered, by clericalism. The Minister is still very often privileged with making a final decision on a wide range of issues, from the purchase of a new vacuum cleaner to the choice of study materials. The collective memory of the Minister as a significant person in the community may be fading, but the use of the terms 'vacancy' or, still used in some places, *interregnum*, indicate that there is a need for someone in authority and that takes away from the responsibility of the elders and members.

1.3 Approach to study

This work is above all a work of practical theology. It will explore how an understanding of God and God's involvement in the church and the world is made manifest in the church's ministry. Practical theology is grounded in

⁴ For example, I currently serve a pastorate of three churches and a community centre, thus quadrupling the number of regular meetings (elders and management). The pastorate is ecumenical involving a doubling of denominational responsibilities and is situated in two distinct towns, doubling both the ecumenical relationships and the civic and political connections. Former pastorates have involved a journey of 17 miles between churches in rural areas. The time remaining for the building up of relationships with church members is significantly reduced in these situations.

real lived experience and the methodology employed will need to be able to access that experience in meaningful ways.

Using a 'grounded theory' approach, with no opening hypothesis, the pattern of study will mimic the pastoral cycle, or spiral, – experience-analysis and reflection-action.

The gathering of experience will set out to discover two different, but linked, pictures of ministry. This will begin with a reading of the history of United Reformed Church ministry, from the Reformation itself through the unions in 1972, 1986 and 2000 to the present day. Through commentary, official documents and reports, records of debate, statistics and correspondence, the 'official' picture of URC ministry will unfold, together with the very real concerns and issues being faced today. Then an ethnographic study of ministry in the South Western Synod will be carried out to find out, from the experience of practising ministers, what is considered effective ministry and what opportunities there are for change and development. Finally, Contextual Bible Study groups will look at specific scriptural passages to see what they are saying about ministry then and now.

Analysis and reflection will use an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach. Appreciative Inquiry comes from the world of change management but has become valued in church circles, and particularly the United Reformed Church, for its strength-based and generative principles, which seek to build on what is working well. Provocative Propositions, a striking feature of AI will form the basis of a call to action in the closing chapters.

1.4 Contents of thesis

1.4.1 Methodology

As previously stated, the methodology employed in this study has been constructed from several sources and related disciplines, including anthropology and change management.

A work situating itself within the field of practical theology, it will construct an overarching framework from Appreciative Inquiry and the Pastoral Cycle. Research tools used in the different stages of the cycle will include:

- Ethnographic field-work
- Contextual Bible study
- Grounded theory
- Participant action research
- Paired conversations
- Provocative Propositions, from Appreciative Inquiry

Each of these components will be examined and critiqued with elements of each being brought together to form a bespoke methodology, a patchwork carefully fitted together, that will serve the needs of this study.

Throughout the work the four voices of theology, identified by Helen Cameron and her partners (Cameron et al 2010, p53) – *formal, normative, espoused, operant* – will be identified. These voices might be further defined as theological and academic (*formal*), creed, teaching, liturgies and Scriptural understanding (*normative*), what is said (*espoused*) and what is done in practice (*operant*). Identifying the different voices will help clarify the arguments and assist with finding resolutions that are grounded in reality.

1.4.2 Reading about ministry

Following the chapter on methodology, the next chapter will explore current ministry in the United Reformed Church. Beginning with its origins in the Reformation begun by Luther but leaning more heavily on the reforms and writings of Calvin, Reformed ministry developed particular features of its own, partly as a reaction to perceived, and actual, corruption of the priesthood.

Having developed in different ways, three strands of Reformed ministry⁵ came together in the United Reformed Church, each with its own quite different emphasis, and the way in which elements of each were woven together to give us the ministry we now have will be described.

There have been a number of attempts to define ministry and its various aspects and these will be laid out for comparison. A number of significant reports to General Assembly will be given critical attention – *Patterns of*

⁵ Presbyterian Church in England, Congregational Church, Churches of Christ

Ministry (1995), Equipping the Saints (2005) and Challenge to the church (2008) – as will the issues debated at General Assemblies and Mission Councils during past ten years. Note will also be taken of other discussion fora – *Reform*, the magazine of the United Reformed Church, and a conference/consultation on ministry that took place at Westminster College in 2016.

Primary and secondary sources, official reports and records, printed correspondence and articles, together with relevant statistics, will all be used to create an 'official' picture of ministry and its contemporary issues.

1.4.3 Data collection and analysis

The data collection for further study has mainly been carried out in two ways – a study of ministry in the South Western Synod, which was created using the principles of both ethnography and Appreciative Inquiry, together with Contextual Bible Study groups.

From ethnography came the intention to observe and depict the practice of ministry, while from Appreciative Inquiry came the process of appreciative conversations, governed by a protocol that ensured consistency. Interviewees were each asked the same questions:

1. What do you see as effective ministry where you are?
2. What opportunities do you see for change or improvement?
3. What resources would help with these changes?
4. What Bible texts have inspired or sustained your ministry?

The first three questions were used to do a SOAR (Hinrichs & Stavros 2009) analysis of ministry – looking for its Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and necessary Resources. The transcribed conversations were supplemented by a group session with Synod ministers.

The fourth question provided a range of texts to be studied by groups of Ministers and elders in the National Synod of Wales, using the Contextual Bible Study method. Contextual Bible Study comes via Glasgow from South Africa, though it is also influenced by the work of South American scholars, including Paulo Freire.

Both sets of data are coded and analysed to draw up another, more local, picture of United Reformed Church ministry and its current concerns.

1.4.4 Critical dialogue

The 'official' picture and the 'local' experience of ministry will be compared and contrasted. I will use these terms – local and official – to differentiate between the two data sources, being the written sources and the spoken sources from interviews and group work. They will be used without prejudice: no hierarchy of importance is to be concluded. There will be concerns and issues in common, but particular attention will be paid to those areas where a different viewpoint has emerged.

Along the way, a new question arises that brings a new issue into focus. That issue is the ecclesiology of the United Reformed Church. The URC is a conciliar church, giving authority to three different councils – the local church meeting, Synod meetings and General Assembly – and the way in which this has come to operate will be discussed and critiqued. Many of the answers to the original research questions are already evident in official documents and in the reflections of those whose experience forms the basis of the gathered data. The new question is whether there is a better way of using the existing structures of the Church that will prevent agreed strategies for change remaining as words in a report

1.4.5 Provocative propositions

Provocative propositions are a particular feature of the Appreciative Inquiry process. They use the present tense to speak about an anticipated future reality. Here they form a bridge between the analysis of all the gathered data and the final conclusions.

One of these propositions will focus on the construction of a theological framework that will underpin all ministry in the United Reformed Church. That framework will form the final segment of this chapter.

1.4.6 Conclusions

The final chapter will be more than a conclusion. The pastoral cycle is more properly a spiral. Any action that comes out of the analysis and reflection will of necessity create a new, or renewed, situation, resulting in ongoing unanswered questions and consequences.

Following a recap of the previous chapters, attention will be given to issues related to the study's findings, but beyond the scope of this work. There will be a need to address the mind-set of the Church, re-orienting its attention on the local church and its mission. Changing the way ministry is deployed and practised will inevitably demand different forms of training and support.

1.4.7 Appendices

At the end of the thesis will be a number of appendices. These will include background information on the selection, training and deployment of URC ministry and evidence of engagement with the university's policies on ethical research practice. A range of papers, including the choice of interviewees, examples of coding and selected transcripts are given to illustrate further the ethnographic survey. The final appendix will be a comprehensive bibliography.

1.5 A word about language

The English language can often lead to ambiguity as words can have subtly different meanings in different contexts. Church language compounds this by taking words used in secular life and giving them completely different meanings. A prime example of this is the word 'grace'. In everyday life it is used to imply something like 'elegance' or 'serenity' and describes appearance or movement. In church, the word means 'a free gift from God'. So the expression 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ', rather than commenting on his demeanour, really means that Jesus was the gift of God to the world.

This particular study needs some kind of explanation of the terminology used to avoid unnecessary confusion. To begin with 'ministry' (lower case m) will be taken to mean all the service carried out by people in church, regardless of their status. This is in line with the definition given in

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry:

The word *ministry* in its broadest sense denotes the service to which the whole people of God is called, whether as individuals, as a local community, or as the universal Church. (BEM 2007 p21)

Where 'minister' is also used with a lower-case m, it will refer to all these people – lay and ordained. The popular usage of the word 'minister' – an ordained church leader – will be rendered with an upper-case M and where necessary further defined. So, a Minister will always be an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament. Stipendiary and non-stipendiary, or self-supporting, will be used to indicate their financial status.

The United Reformed Church has some difficulty with the difference between lay and ordained. They are not alone in this, of course, but it is rather compounded in the case of the URC by the relationship between Ministers, elders and members. Ministers of Word and Sacrament are ordained, called and set aside to a particular work. So too are Elders, though they are sometimes included with 'the laity'. There are, nevertheless, a range of lay ministries serving the mission of the church – lay preachers, Church Related Community Workers (called and trained, but commissioned, not ordained), youth and family workers, church members. The respecting of the ordination of elders is one of the concluding propositions and every attempt will be made to pay attention to this in the writing of this thesis.

Ministry has been further defined, for the purposes of this work, but mission also needs perhaps further exploration. Both David Peel and Paul Avis have written on the relationship between mission and ministry. For Peel, a missionary focus means 'rediscovering a gospel faithfulness to represent God's Word of selfless love to those outside the church' (Peel 2003, p31). Avis does not so much disagree but bring a different emphasis – 'Mission is the whole Church bringing the whole Christ to the whole world' (Avis 2005, p1). For both there is the impetus to move beyond the church building in order to introduce the wider world to the truths of the gospel. Peel wants to stress the grace of God, while for Avis there is the importance of wholeness and unity. Both refer to David Bosch and in his comprehensive and influential book *Transforming Mission* (Bosch 1991) he begins with a 'interim definition', including a paragraph beginning – Christian mission gives expression to the dynamic relationship between

God and the world (Bosch 1991, p9). Together these offer a working definition for this particular study – the Church’s mission is all that mediates the message of the gospel to the world. This does imply a need for Biblical knowledge to unpack what is actually meant by ‘the message of the gospel’ but is not descriptive or restrictive in the shape that mission may take. St Francis may or may not have told his companions to ‘use words if necessary’, but it provides a useful reminder that evangelism is not only served by preaching and other forms of spoken word but is also facilitated by action in the world.

As already explained, it will be necessary to find a way of referring to the two sets of issues around ministry that will be in dialogue – those culled from written sources and those from transcribed conversations. For the purposes of clarity, the former will be called ‘official’ and the latter will be called ‘local’.

1.6 Introducing the practitioner

It seemed important to offer some personal statement at the beginning of this work. Practitioner, or participant, research demands a recognition of potential bias, which is not so easily laid to one side.

I am a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the United Reformed Church, ordained in 1997. Theologically liberal, I have identified as a feminist all my adult life, by which I mean I believe that all human beings, regardless of their origins, abilities, age, gender, sexuality are entitled to the same rights and responsibilities. I have strong ecumenical roots, growing up in a Methodist family (my father was a local preacher and one of my brothers is a Methodist Minister), attending an Anglican school and my mother-in-law was a devout Catholic. My initial ministerial formation was at Northern College in Manchester, part of the Northern Federation that included the Northern Baptist College, Unitarian College and the Hartley Victoria Methodist College.

My ministry experience began as a Sunday School teacher in my teens in the Methodist church. I was ordained as an Elder in 1986 and accredited

as a Lay Preacher in 1993 and served as secretary to the Synod Church and Society Committee.

Post-ordination I have had experience both in and out of pastoral charge. I began as a pastoral Minister in South Wales, moving after seven years to a post as a community minister, working with an ecumenical partnership on the outskirts of Glasgow developing relationships with the community. I then moved to a pastorate in Fife for four years before becoming Education and Learning Enabler for the South Western Synod, which was where I began this study. Two years ago I moved back into pastorate ministry in North Wales. On the denominational stage I have been an Assembly Committee member (Church and Society) and Convenor (Youth and Children's Work) and, as such, a member of Mission Council and have also been a frequent member of General Assembly. I have been part of the steering group for *Walking the Way*, the United Reformed Church's recent approach to encouraging and developing missional discipleship and was part of the planning group for the first major gathering of ordained Ministers in 2018. For some years I was part of the Silence and Retreats core group. I have been privileged to visit churches in France, Lesotho, Hungary, Taiwan, Cuba, Tennessee and California.

It is important to note, and this will become more relevant in later chapters, that I was not born and bred in the United Reformed Church or one of its component denominations. The 1972 union completely passed me by as semi-regular Methodist attender. For me, when I first attended it, the URC was simply the nearest non-conformist church to my home. Despite becoming a member and being ordained as an elder, it was at the point of offering myself for ordination that I made a real commitment to the URC. This does change my perspective somewhat, in that I have no nostalgic memories of older times as some of my colleagues and many church members do. On the other hand it does give me some sense of how the younger generations, born since that union, view the discussions about roots and their contemporary relevance.

On a more personal note, I have been married for 45 years and have three children. I have worked in the theatre and in the voluntary sector, as an

ante-natal teacher and supervising day care for Age Concern, and lived in North East England and Yorkshire as well as North and South Wales, Scotland and the South West of England. My other interests are in the arts and creative craft sphere – music, theatre, fibre-related crafts – and the environment, whether gardening, walking or involvement in ‘green’ issues. Such life and ministry experience must impact on the way I see the world today, both consciously and subconsciously. It has exposed me to ways of life, including church life, that are very different from my own and led me to question some of my own prejudices. Self-awareness is a prerequisite for participant/practitioner research, and I have over the years explored both Myers-Briggs typology and the Enneagram to get to know myself better. Such study has deepened my understanding of the rich variety that makes up the population and also given me an appreciation of the way in which the different kinds of people are interdependent. I hope this has made me more tolerant, less arrogant and fundamentally open to genuine dialogue. The reader will judge.

This statement is given with the intention of explaining that any seeming bias, theological or otherwise, that comes across in this study, without specific explanation or justification, is genuinely unintentional. It is inevitably woven through with elements from the narrative of my own life, but I have, in listening to a range of other voices, attempted a comprehensive narrative for our time.

2. Methodology: how to find out what you want to know

2.1 Preamble

Keeping the aim of creating a new theological framework for ministry in mind was at the forefront when determining the best methodology for this study. As an academic exercise it would be expected that reference to previous authoritative sources would be cited and this is indeed the case here. However, it is the local level, in church meetings and congregational practice that any theology or theological framework must pay attention to if it is not to be simply left on the bookshelf but can actually inform and renew the life of the local church. This leads to a weaving together of different strands of research – book-based and out in the field – that will combine to offer a coherent whole and the different layers to this methodology are explored in this chapter.

The overarching category is that of Practical Theology. The framework for the methodology is provided by the Pastoral Cycle, working alongside Appreciative Inquiry. A range of research tools will be used: ethnography, grounded theory, focus groups, Contextual Bible Study, theological reflection, in particular using the ‘four voices’ approach developed by Helen Cameron and colleagues (Cameron et al. 2010). As participant action research, a degree of reflexivity is essential and there are ethical considerations to be addressed. The analysis of the gathered data, both textual and gathered from the fieldwork, will be aided by software designed for this specific purpose.

At the end of the chapter, in the interests of openness, I will offer an account and reflection of how the methodology worked in practice.

2.2 Practical theology

Practical theology. What does that term mean? At first glance it would seem to be an oxymoron: *practical* suggests a ‘hands-on’ process, while *theology* clearly involves intellectual activity, the two seeming incompatible. But in fact, it is rather a collocation – a pair of very different words, which together make a specific, often technical, meaning. In this

case, the practical aspect refers to the sphere of investigation, which in this case is ministry, one of the primary activities of the church, whilst the theological task is to ground that activity in the belief system of the church, bringing together orthodoxy and orthopraxy into a coherent whole. As a discipline, practical theology has evolved to concern itself with more than just the pastoral practice of the clergy: it also encompasses the work of elders, lay preachers and all who enable the mission of the local church, the way in which the church, locally and at a Synod level, organizes itself and its presence in the secular world. In other words, it is an amalgam of pastoral theology, ecclesiology and public theology. More than this, practical theology is at the heart of church life. Pete Ward, leaning on a definition of theology from Rowan Williams, claims that –

Christians are already practical theologians simply because they are ‘in the middle’ of the celebration, communication and critical conversation that are characteristic of the Christian community. (Ward 2017, p14)

Whilst Ward is not wrong about the active Christian being in the midst of these different parts of the life of the Church, I would want to assert that an added element would need to be some form of reflective practice that sets this life alongside Biblical understanding to give it a context other than simply ‘contemporary’. Otherwise it can be justly accused of naivety. Nor does practical theology confine its influences, or accessible tools to other established theological branches. Robin Greenwood, for the Anglican Church, has long been an exponent of team ministry that uses the gifts of all and has not been averse to drawing in insights from other disciplines, including business.⁶ MODEM⁷ – an organisation that brings together the worlds of management and the Church for mutual learning and growth – has also contributed to the field with a series of anthologies on leadership, together with a number of shorter booklets. The writers come from a wide range of church and business backgrounds. More recently, a reappraisal of discipleship, under the name *Walking the Way*,

⁶ See, for example, *The Ministry Team Handbook: Local Ministry as Partnership* (Greenwood 2000, SPCK)

⁷ <https://www.modemuk.org>

has been made in many denominations, including the United Reformed Church, who, in partnership with the Methodist Church, are producing materials based around the activities of the early apostles in Acts, chapter 2, entitled *Holy Habits*. (Roberts 2016) This approach reminds us, should we need it, that practical theology is not only concerned with the structures and leadership of the church, but also with the lived faith of church members.

Ballard and Pritchard, referring to Anselm's motto, *fidens quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding), situate practical theology 'at the frontier between faith understanding the world and faith in action'. (Ballard and Pritchard 1996. p23) There is more than a suggestion here that practical theology is not simply an academic exercise but is premised on acting on knowledge.

A more expansive definition is given by Swinton and Mowat:

Practical Theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world. (Swinton and Mowat 2006. p6)

As an overall concept, or a meta-organizing principle, this is a definition that fits this particular study well. It combines Ward's and Ballard's definitions as it seeks to examine the current ministry of a particular church through the lenses of the contemporary context and the doctrines and beliefs of that church, with the aim of redrawing, if necessary, the supporting theological framework for that practice.

Over the years, membership has fallen in the Church in the United Kingdom, but the number of congregations has not decreased at the same rate. There are fewer clergy, nor can the church afford to pay more, so there is a greater reliance on non-stipendiary, local and lay ministry and in many cases, it is expediency that has been the impetus for change, rather than conviction. The United Reformed Church has not been immune from this process. Revd Martin Camroux, a recently retired United Reformed Church minister, has reviewed the annual returns figures regularly and his

paper *The Future of the URC*, published privately in 2017, quotes a minister currently serving in the North West:

The demographic time bomb has ‘gone off’ for me. I have done 9 funerals of church members so far this winter (out of a total membership between the three churches of less than 100). In the three congregations I primarily serve, I have one properly functioning treasurer and no functioning secretaries (though I have one in development who may turn out to be a gem). In fact in one church I have no treasurer at all and in one I have no secretary at all. What I have discovered is that the denominational system still expects its pound of flesh and simply assumes that I will fill in the gaps.

⁸

One pragmatic change, though, can lead to another and a consequent spiralling away from traditional practice. A church that moves too far down this road becomes divorced from its foundations.

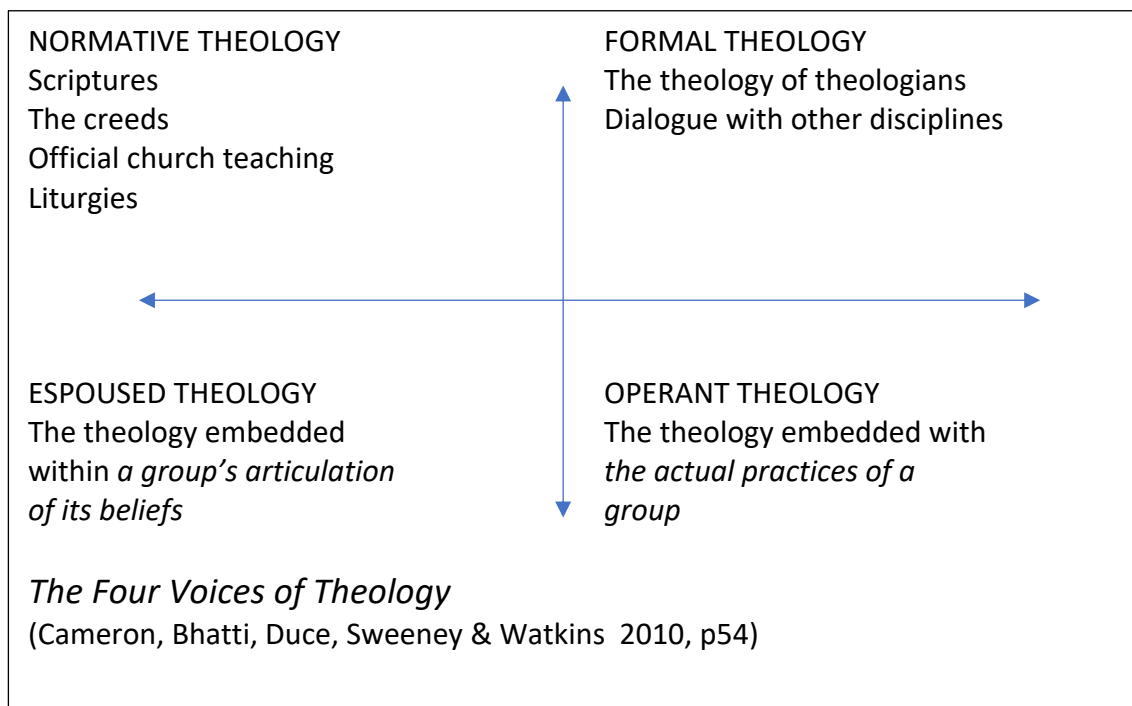
A further challenge to the traditional role of the church has come through changes in society. When a new Council ‘hub’ opened across the road, a church in Merseyside found itself presented with competition. This new modern centre offered a toddler group, lunch club and other social facilities that had been the weekly programme of the church. The church building was aging and in constant need of attention. The number of potential volunteers had dwindled. The church was faced with the question of what their ministry and mission was now to be, when the ways they knew were taken from them. This, of course, has been the story of the Church throughout history as it ceded education and health care to the state through the centuries. However, the secularisation of social services comes today with the demographic challenges of ageing and falling membership rolls and churches do not always know how to respond. Practical theology can assist the work of drawing the threads of belief, context and practice back together.

⁸ Privately published paper by Revd Martin Camroux – *The Future of the URC*
– page 2

2.3 Four voices of theology

Helen Cameron's identification of four voices of theology (Cameron et al, 2010, p53) offers a useful tool to employ in this study that encompasses tradition, stated positions and practice. Cameron uses the terms *formal*, *normative*, *espoused* and *operant*. She describes them further: *formal theology* is the classical theology of theologians and the position theology takes in dialogue with other disciplines; *normative theology* comes through the use of scripture and the creeds, a church's teaching and its liturgy, providing an authoritative voice; *espoused theology* and *operant theology* can be more simply put as 'what is said' and 'what is done in practice'. Jeff Astley, earlier in 2002, identified 'ordinary theology' as the way in which Christians spoke about God without benefit of formal theological education and claimed a valued place for it in the fields of research and other study. Refuting suggestions that such talk might be too incoherent, too personal or subjective, too uncritical, he placed it not simply alongside academic theology:

I shall contrast ordinary theology not so much with academic theology as with received, official, *ecclesial theology*, which is 'extraordinary' in a rather different way. (Astley 2002, p154)



Cameron and partners offer this caveat:

We must be clear that these four voices are not discrete, separate from one another; each voice is never simple. We can never hear one voice without there being echoes from the other three. (Cameron, Bhatti, Duce, Sweeney and Watkins 2010, p54)

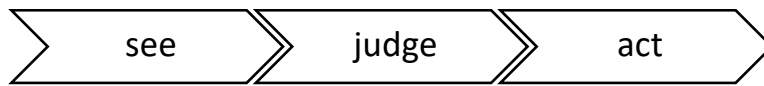
Though they appear to come in pairs - *formal/normative*, *espoused/operant* - suggesting a division between theory and practice, this is illusory: each can support or critique another. Further, a recognition of the interconnectedness of the four voices can help dispel the tendency to cry 'hypocrite' or 'heretic' at times of tension in debate. Identifying these different theological voices as the ministry landscape is surveyed may help to unpick some seemingly knotty issues. In addition, keeping them in mind will tend to point out those areas where discussion is becoming too partisan, or one-(or more) sided.

2.4 A framework for research

The framework for this research is provided by the Pastoral Cycle, specifically the model introduced by Emanuel Larty, used alongside Appreciative Inquiry, an approach to change management that comes from the world of business. This is a combination I have devised to ensure that the work is both grounded and dynamic.

2.4.1 The pastoral cycle

As an overarching framework for the study the pastoral cycle seems the most appropriate, being flexible enough to accommodate a range of research tools and offering a developmental approach. Indeed, it has been widely used since it first appeared with the formula of the See-Judge-Act sequence, often attributed to Liberation Theology. In fact it was introduced to the Catholic Church by the Belgian cardinal Joseph Cardijn, who developed it with his organization Young Catholic Workers and was adopted by Catholic Action and the Latin American Church before being endorsed by Pope John XXIII in his 1961 encyclical *Mater et Magistra*. (<http://JosephCardijn.com> 2017). The model has been translated and adapted many times from its simple three stage beginnings:



to the more nuanced cycle promoted by Emmanuel Lartey (Woodward and Pattison 2000. p132), which I will describe shortly.

The method has also been popularized for congregational use, notably by Laurie Green in his pastoral cycle resource book (Green, 1990), where he guided the readers through a process that, if successfully completed, would move them, not back to the beginning, but to a new situation because they would have been transformed by the action response they made. The concept of a pastoral spiral, rather than a closed cycle, has merit, being a reflection of the reality. Without the action response, the process leads only to understanding as an intellectual/theological exercise, rather than a way of engaging in mission.

It is this flexibility that makes the pastoral cycle a good foundation for this study. There is a pleasingly logical flow to the elements, notwithstanding the occasional back and forth movement between stages, that drives the work on and creates a sense of direction leading to the possibility of change.

Ward has helpfully listed some of the current critiques of the pastoral cycle. (Ward 2017, p100ff) It can be too problem oriented, a little programmatic, rather too suspicious of the *status quo*, and overly analytical at the expense of theological reflection. He goes on to examine other methods of theological reflection that do not use the pastoral cycle. However, being aware of the potential dangers listed above acts as counter measure and the other methods of theological reflection Ward offers can be creatively woven into the cycle, particularly using the Larty model as the foundation.

2.4.2 Appreciative Inquiry

Set alongside this established framework for theological exploration, or rather overlaying it, Appreciative Inquiry offers a remarkably similar sequence of investigation but also proposes a particular approach – that of looking for the positive and building on that, rather than being simply a problem-solving mechanism. The United Reformed Church

has adopted Appreciative Inquiry as a key approach to a number of aspects of its work and has partnered with a British organisation⁹ to offer training opportunities to ministers, church officers and support staff. That relationship alone would not be sufficient to advocate the use of Appreciative Inquiry as part of a research methodology, were it not for its origins. The subtitle of one of the earlier handbooks is *Change at the Speed of Imagination* (Watkins & Mohr 2001), which immediately sets out its stall to be considered a new and creative look at organisational development. The concept comes from the world of change management, initially in the United States of America. It leans heavily on the theory of social constructionism – the idea that our understanding of the world is contingent on our place in it, our socialization and our social interactions. Appreciative Inquiry builds on this, using the theory of generativity, the way in which conversations can lead to changed understanding and open up the mind to new possibilities. It initially proposed five principles:

- constructionist – words create worlds and we each have a different way of seeing
- simultaneity – the way in which we ask questions can fundamentally determine how a conversation will proceed
- anticipatory – using imagination to discover alternative images of the future
- poetic – valuing the power of narrative to uncover meaning
- positive – looking for the best to discover the key strengths of an individual or organization

Since 1987, when David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva published *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life*, the first professional publication using the term, Appreciative Inquiry has been used in public corporations, such as British Airways, MacDonaldis and NASA, in schools and medical centres, but also in smaller venues, such as a hostel for the homeless in London and, increasingly, churches.

⁹ Appreciating People, based in Liverpool. See www.appreciatingpeople.co.uk

Mark Lau Branson (2004) provides a very thorough example of how Appreciative Inquiry helped the First Presbyterian Church in Altadena, California, recover a sense of mission. He arrived at a church that was struggling with the weight of its history and finding it difficult to move on. The older members of the congregation had been Japanese immigrants and successive generations had naturally become more American, leading to tensions. Branson initiated a series of conversations, or interviews, with all the members. Elders, with Branson, developed the questions to be asked, carried out the work and analysed the results. They were asking what was important to the members, what they wished for the church and, through concentrating on the strengths identified, found a way forward. Appreciative Inquiry is increasingly being used as a study tool, particularly when the research is focussed on producing change in some shape or form. Jane Reed, writing in 2007, looks at the potential contribution of Appreciative Inquiry to different research methodologies, including ethnography and action research:

While each approach has its own sets of procedures that follow from the world view espoused, AI can be seen to have links with many of these and therefore may need to develop an eclectic mix of approaches, not only to be true to the principles of focusing on success in order to facilitate change but also to be coherent and transparent. (Reed 2007, p66)

Reed is not simply a flag-waver for Appreciative Inquiry and is aware of the limitations that others have found, and concludes:

AI can be research for change, drawing on OD (organisational development) traditions, but this change may require a different way of doing research and a different way of evaluating it. (Reed 2007, p201)

It is in the spirit of developing 'an eclectic mix of approaches' that Appreciative Inquiry is being used as one aspect of the methodology for this study.

Sometimes criticized for being a kind of Pollyanna, glass-half-full approach (Rowett 2012, p31), avoiding anything difficult or problematic, Appreciative Inquiry has a greater depth than this and seeks to draw the

best out of a situation. Where generic problem-solving focuses on what is going wrong, fixing it and returning to the status quo, Appreciative Inquiry is concerned with what is going well and what could be improved or different. Gervase Busche has written extensively about Appreciative Inquiry and is involved in its continual development. He defends the approach this way:

The thing that concerns me most about the current excitement and interest in appreciative inquiry (AI) is that many of the consultants and managers I talk to who claim to be doing AI don't seem to really understand it. Even some of my clients, after years of doing it, still don't understand what I think is most fundamental about AI. They all seem to get blinded by the "positive stuff". After years of focusing on problems and deficits and dysfunction they get entranced with "focusing on the positive" and equate this with AI. But that's not the core of appreciative inquiry. AI is about the generative, not the positive. (Busche http://www.wellcoach.com/memberships/images/AI_Positive.pdf accessed 10.5.2019)

This approach is particularly helpful with churches that have become rather too used to bemoaning falling roles, crumbling buildings and apparent growing irrelevance. Appreciative Inquiry is not just about positive thinking, but the Positive principle can be a necessary antidote to the 'negativity bias' that can tend to affect groups and individuals. More psychological weight is often given to bad experiences than good ones and some researchers assert that negative emotions have an impact close to three times stronger than positive emotions. (Slack & Thomas 2017, p27) In recent years the initial five principles – constructionist, simultaneity, anticipatory, poetic, positive – have been expanded to include five further emergent principles. These are:

- the Wholeness principle, which brings in the wider context
- the Enactment principle, which encourages experimentation and risk-taking
- the Free Choice principle, which takes seriously the limitations that people can put on themselves
- the Awareness principle, which is linked to mindfulness

- the Narrative principle, which recognises the transformative power of story.

(Quinney and Slack 2017, p57)

A further aspect of the development of Appreciative Inquiry has been the recognition that the initial process used is further assisted by two other tools. The first of these is the paired conversation, which forms the basis of much of the Discovery or exploratory stage of the process. They are essentially semi-structured interviews, usually referred to as ‘protocols’. A protocol will normally have between three and six open questions.

Guidelines for forming protocols all tend to begin with the need for questions to be a little surprising, sparking the imagination. (Slack and Thomas 2017, p31) An ‘active listening’ approach is essential to moving the conversation along, using interventions to probe further or keep on track, though the interviewer needs to be self-aware enough not to restrict the conversation and so miss out on unexpected, but valuable side-tracks. Paired conversations can be a stand-alone AI exercise, i.e. outwith the 5D process, indicating their importance in the AI approach.

The second is the SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results/resources) analysis – an alternative to the more traditional SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis. The SOAR is more action oriented with a focus on implementation. On the other hand, the SWOT is more analysis oriented, with the potential for depleting energy if the lists of weaknesses and threats become too long. Both tools – paired conversations and SOAR will be used in this study.

2.4.3 Putting it all together

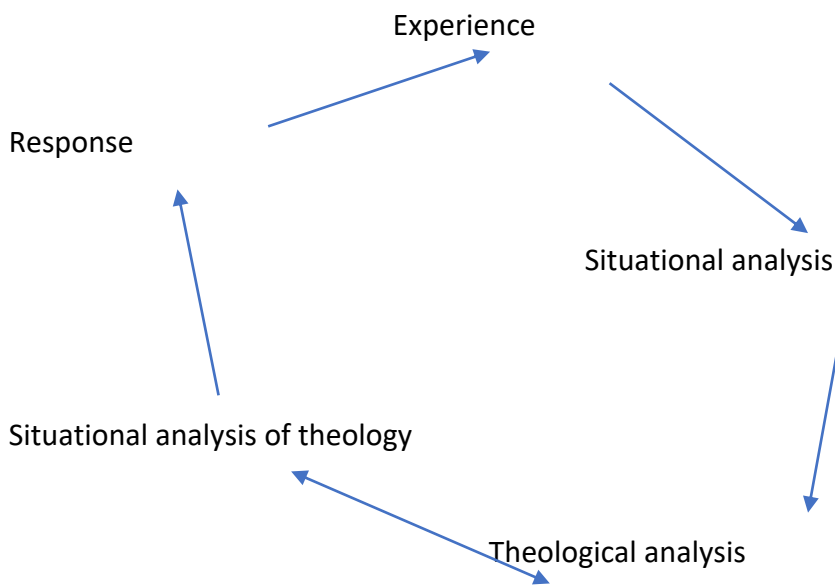
The stages of the Appreciative Inquiry process - known as the 5 Ds - map quite well onto those of the pastoral cycle. The more popular version of this is found in Laurie Green’s workbook for local churches, *Let’s do theology*. (Green 1990). An experience, is explored, reflected upon and a response is developed, which then leads potentially to a new experience and the cycle begins again, or, to put it more accurately, turns into a spiral.

The following table shows how this relates to the stages of Appreciative Inquiry:

Pastoral Cycle (Green, 1990)	Appreciative Inquiry
Experience : identifying the situation to be explored	Definition : choosing the topic and planning the approach
Exploration : finding out at much as possible	Discovery : sharing stories, hearing a variety of voices
Reflection : applying a faith perspective	Dream : imagining possibilities and potentials
Response : turning understanding into action	Design : redesigning the future
	Delivery : innovation and improvisation

(Slack & Thomas 2017, p43)

However, Emmanuel Lartey’s more nuanced version of the Pastoral Cycle better reflects the iterative nature of Appreciative Inquiry as it returns to previous stages in the cycle when new information or insights demand, only moving to the next stage when everything has been taken into consideration. This does call for careful discernment but creates a fuller analysis. Lartey also specifically leaves more scope for theological reflection. Lartey begins, as does Green, with an experience, which he describes as being ‘incarnational’, a lived experience. This leads on to situational analysis, which in turn leads to theological analysis, bringing in the faith perspective. The penultimate stage is a situational analysis of theology, coming back into the here and now, before determining a response. The model shows that the middle three stages – Situational analysis, Theological analysis and Situational analysis of theology - are returned to, back and forth, until a way forward becomes clear:



(Pattison & Woodward 2000, p132)

These stages relate to Appreciative Inquiry in the following way:

Experience	Definition: choosing the topic and planning the approach
Situational analysis: multi-perspectival, collective seeing/comparing visions	Discovery: sharing stories, hearing a variety of voices
Theological analysis: faith perspectives	Dream: imagining possibilities and potentials
Situational analysis of theology	Design: redesigning the future
Response	Delivery: innovation and improvisation

For reasons of clarity, I will use the Appreciative Inquiry names for the different stages of study.

2.5 Progressing the work

Each different stage of the research project, commonly referred to in Appreciative Inquiry as the 5Ds, calls for different tools and approaches. Definition and Delivery, the first and last stages, are the most simple, with the second stage, Discovery being the most complex and using a variety of different tools. These are described and examined below. Reference is also made to the need for reflexivity and good ethical practice.

2.5.1 Definition

The first stage - *Definition*, in the context of this work, is primarily represented by the study proposal, outlined in the introduction: that the stated theology of ministry of the denomination is no longer coherent with the current practice of ministry, both lay and ordained, such that a new theological framework is required.

This opening statement is further explored in the chapter that deals with the development of ministry in the Reformed tradition, leading to the United Reformed Church ministry and the debates on issues relating to ministry that have taken place up to the present day. This takes the place of a more formal literature review and draws on both primary and secondary sources, official reports, statistics and correspondence.

The subsequent stages of the cycle each call for a blend of a variety of methodologies.

2.5.2 Discovery

The *Discovery* stage is potentially the most time-consuming and most complex, drawn from a conflation of different but not dissimilar approaches. The primary data set will be provided by a snapshot of current ministry as it is practiced in the South Western Synod of the United Reformed Church. Primarily an ethnographic study, the information will be gathered from paired conversations and statistical data, using a blend of

methods, including ethnographic fieldwork, action research, focus group practice and the interface between qualitative and quantitative research.

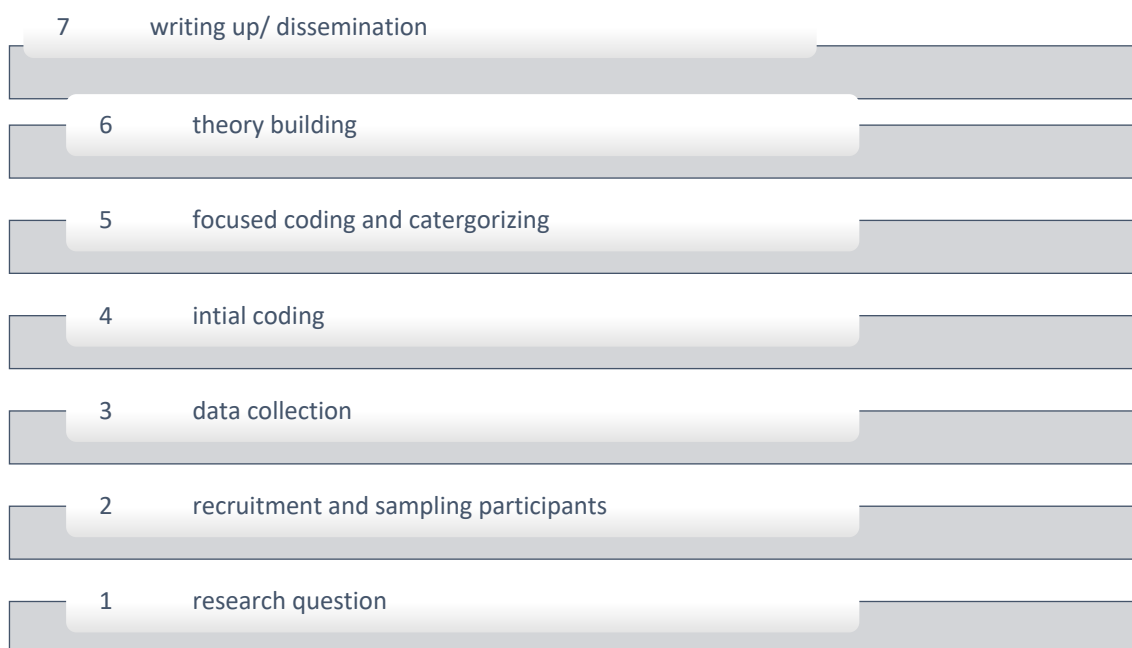
2.5.2a Ethnography

Ethnography has its origins in the nineteenth century, the period of imperial expansion, when travellers went into the far corners of the world to study the cultures of the peoples who lived there. Fast forward to the twenty-first century and that kind of study is still being carried out, but the term 'ethnography' has been redefined to include the study of the culture of societal groupings, which may not be foreign or alien, as such, but are different and discrete; e.g. a school community, a group of squatters or the population of a village. Starting out in the realms of anthropology, ethnography has become associated with social research that takes in sociology, psychology, human geography, making it hard to produce a single definition. The task of the ethnographer is to collect data and analyse it, in order to create a rich picture that will aid understanding of the culture under the microscope. Collecting such data involves the researcher 'participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts'. (Hammersley and Atkinson. 2007. p 3)

2.5.2b Grounded Theory

It allows for, if not actually demands, a grounded theory approach, privileging empirical evidence and encouraging a thorough understanding of what is, before seeking to theorise. In grounded theory, conclusions are drawn from reflections on observations, rather than a previously thought-through hypothesis being tested for validity. It would be disingenuous to claim that no previous ideas or principles have been considered and, of course, along the way certain insights may arise, but they all need rigorous testing against the data and evidence discovered and there can be no final conclusion that has not in some way arisen from the situation investigated. Kathy Charmaz (2014) from the outset emphasizes the flexibility of method allowed by grounded theory, pointing out that Barney G Glaser and Anselm L Strauss, the 'fathers' of grounded theory invited their readers to use

grounded theory strategies flexibly in their own way. The pattern or process that Charmaz describes indicates just how well grounded theory fits into the overall structure of this research:



(Charmaz 2014, p18)

She qualifies this by pointing out that grounded theory research is not as linear as this might suggest, because analysis does not wait for all the data to be collected. Indeed, it is this interplay between data collection and analysis that in the end determines when enough data has been assembled for a coherent theory to be constructed. This reference to an iterative process appears in all the different strands of this study.

There is a clear link between grounded theory and Appreciative Inquiry. Grounded theory, as the name implies, grows its conclusion from the answers to opening questions. Appreciative Inquiry has generativity as one of its key concepts, by which it is always seeking to create new possibilities from its exercise. Jane Reed also finds similarities in the way people are invited to take part. In Appreciative Inquiry sampling is not usually random and participation is more strategically determined. Referring to the work of Glaser and Strauss, Reed finds this closely related to the concept of theoretical sampling:

Theoretical sampling was discussed in some detail by Glaser and Strauss (1967), in their presentation of grounded theory,

and referred to a process by which sampling was driven by reflection on emerging theory. (Reed 2007, p71)

2.5.2c Data collection

Fieldwork is the name given to the collection of data for an ethnographic study and Blommaert and Jie (2010) identify three distinct stages – prior to fieldwork, in the field and after fieldwork. Clearly the ‘after the fieldwork’ stage refers to the sorting and analysis of the data, but the ‘prior to the fieldwork’ stage is just as important. Here the strategy for the fieldwork is formulated: the choice of interviewees, obtaining the proper consents, identifying any relevant documents and so on. Nor are the three stages completely self-contained. There may be occasions when it is clear that there is more information or a different aspect of the culture still to be gathered. This work needs just as careful preparation as the first batch of data collection and so the researcher goes back and forth between the stages, just as grounded theory is constructed and not unlike the way Lartey’s pastoral cycle works as shown above.

Completeness is the goal, rather than a perfect progression through the different stages, whether fieldwork or pastoral cycle. Agar (1996) is not alone in placing the researcher in the learning role of child or student. Jenkins describes ethnography as seeking ‘continuities by discerning repetitions under the often bewildering experience of re-ordering’, (Jenkins 1997, p26) in the same way as a child makes sense of the world, through observation and testing.

2.5.2d Paired conversations

Appreciative Inquiry offers a particular way of collecting data from interviews. Appreciative paired conversations are semi-formal, being based on around a series of fairly standard questions, called protocols, that encourage the telling of stories. Typically, such conversations begin by asking the interviewee to recount a positive example of whatever is being studied and the conversation moves through thoughts about what qualities were evident and what might have been improved to ideas of how to achieve change. Using a set form, is helpful when it comes to analysis, but

allowing for narrative to enter the conversations allows for the unexpected to appear. Mark Lau Branson describes it this way:

The work of crafting questions is critical – it has a direct relationship to the quality of the data for the entire experience. The questions are intended to foster conversations, so the interviewer does not need to keep strictly to the wording. (Branson 2004, p72)

Branson was working with a team of interviewers, but the principle of a fixed set of questions is also a good discipline for the lone researcher. The selection of interviewees is crucial if a full rich picture is to emerge. In the case of this study, much depends on the definition of the word 'ministry'. From the outset I have been clear that it does not refer only to the work of ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament and so it is important to include retired Ministers and lay people. Size of church, geographical setting, place of work are also significant, so it is necessary to provide a mechanism for ensuring that all the different variables are covered. A grid with two axes – context of ministry and status of ministry – enabled a broad range of interviewees to be drawn up, where 'context' included geographical setting or sphere of work and 'status' referred to variations of stipend and ordination. (See table below.)

Context → Ministry ↓	City	(Market) Town	Rural	Seaside	Hospital	University	LEP	Other	Group interview
Stipendiary		SM1 SM2		SM3(+gm) GM1B (g) SM7	HC1 HC2		SM6	SM5 SM4	GM1
PT Stipendiary	GM1D(g)	SM5	X			GM1CDg)		SL	
NSM	GM1E(g)	NSM2	NSM4		NSM3			NSM1	
Retired			RM1					GM1A (g)	
Local church leader	LM3								
Elder	GE1		GO1A(g)						GE1 GO1
Lay Preacher	GLP1F (g) GLP1C (g)	GO1B(g)	LP1 GLP1E(g)	GLP1D (g) GLP1B(g) GLP1A(g)					GLP1
Lay worker				LM2	JK (g)			LM1	
Informal		LM4							

Colours indicate areas of Synod (g) interviewed as part of group deleted squares = not relevant/appropriate

2.5.2e Group work

Previous research experience¹⁰ suggested that it would be fruitful to talk to groups and allow them to talk to each other. Focus group practice offers particular expertise on this – optimum group size, length of conversation. Bloor et al (2001) highlight the way in which groups can be used as an ancillary method at different stages of the research but also suggest that pre-existing groups, that have a comfortable familiarity one with another, can, in conversation, question and challenge comments and opinions that might have passed unremarked on in a one-to-one situation. Puchta and Potter (2004) discuss the values of formality and informality in group conversations and the challenge of creating a relaxed atmosphere that yet adheres to the task in hand, a delicate balance that requires confident leading.

¹⁰ Whilst studying for a M Min at the University of Wales Lampeter, I carried out research with stipendiary ministers, both URC and Church of Scotland, working outside a pastorate – chaplains, academics, Synod and Assembly officers, etc. This work was not in the end submitted or published.

2.5.2f Reflexivity

However, whether group conversation or one-to-one, there is general agreement that recording and verbatim transcription is the best guard against personal bias, whether conscious or subconscious. That personal bias, or more accurately perhaps, filter, is a very real concern when the researcher, as in this case, is in relationship with the interviewees. This is one respect in which this study differs from most works of ethnography. Indeed one text book is called *The Professional Stranger* (Agar. 1996). As a Minister of Word and Sacrament working in the Synod under investigation, I need to take particular care to be as objective as is possible. This objectivity needs to bear in mind a number of possible biases, in particular theological and political views. The term *participant action research*, another branch of qualitative research, describes just this situation where the researcher is looking into their own field of practice. William R Torbert (2001) identifies first, second- and third-person action research, which he calls inquiry, as the widening of reflective practice to include first conversational partners and from there to the whole organisation. This may not always be explicit, at least in the first or even second person variety, but he argues that third person action inquiry is particularly helpful for Not-for-Prophet (sic) organisations, of which the church is one. This is a helpful approach for this study in particular. Recognising the need to operate with as much critical distance as is possible, I as the main participant and therefore first person, have chosen to refer the analysis of my research to the interviewees and other Ministers in the Synod for comment, making them the second persons. The third person element comes in through consulting ministry practitioners outside of the South Western Synod.

Appreciative Inquiry acknowledges the need for reflexivity, or rather makes the case for it, in its principle of *simultaneity*: the notion that the language, tone and intention of questions can determine the direction of the conversation. Reed states that this principle means that inquiry and change are not separate or sequential stages in development. (Reed 2007,

p26) This awareness is called 'sensitivity' by Swinton and Mowat and they refer not just to the words used, but also to body language and eye contact. (Swinton and Mowat 2006, p61) They make the bold claim that –
the researcher does not simply access methods and tools, but . . . in fact *is* the primary research tool. Because of this, the need for reflexivity is paramount . . . (Swinton and Mowat 2006, p60)

A particular perspective, which I would argue is necessary for good ethnography and grounded theory is feminism. By this I do not mean the simplistic view that thinks of a feminist approach as favouring women's voices and opinions over and above those of men, but an openness to hearing all, regardless of gender, age, social standing or any other categorising, based on belief in the absolute equality of male and female. Elaine Graham argues that an essential feature of feminist theology is acknowledging the embodied experience of individuals:

Practical theology will need to start by listening to people's experiences of embodiment, especially those places where appearance and reality seem out of step. (Graham 2009, p82)

This chimes with the aim of listening for the different voices of theology. Embodied experience is the source material for the *operant* and *espoused* voices

Feminism is also alert to where power is exercised or withheld and privileges everyday experience over organisational expectation. Similarly ethnography, in seeking to understand a culture, needs to investigate the whole lived experience, looking beyond the public face and asking who is silent or silenced.

A further aspect of reflexivity is the need for awareness of power dynamics in the interview situation. This is something I refer to later in my accounts and reflections on the fieldwork interviews and Bible study groups. I have needed to be clear in my own mind that the interviewer role was as separate as possible from my role as training and development officer, but also to find ways of making this clear to the interviewees. Similarly, there was a different dynamic at play when I was leading Bible study with

Minister colleagues and with elders of the pastorate in which I was the serving Minister. Particularly in the latter case, when different colours represented different voices in the transcripts, recording interviews and sessions gave the opportunity of ensuring this self-awareness worked under pressure.

2.5.2g Ethics

The University of Cardiff has its own policy regarding ethical practice and the required process was adhered to. A sample letter of invitation to potential interviewees and consent form will be found in the Appendix. Anonymity is a particular concern in this kind of research and, the United Reformed Church being a small denomination, especial care needs to be taken if participants in the fieldwork are not to be identifiable.

Accordingly, all names, places and church identifiers have been removed from the transcripts and in the main text, when writing about the Bible study groups, I have endeavoured to anonymise participants as far as is possible without reducing the sense. When extracts from the transcripts are used as quotations, only the assigned code will be used.

Some of the concerns cited under 'Reflexivity' also come under the umbrella of ethical practice, such as awareness of power dynamics in relationships.

2.5.2h Printed data

Data, however, is not confined to analysed conversations but can also be found in the analysis of texts that have a bearing on the context or culture being studied. In this case there are a number of documents that have relevance. These range from existing theological statements on ministry in the United Reformed Church to reports and ordination and commissioning liturgies to General Assemblies and articles in *Reform*, the monthly magazine published by the United Reformed Church. Such texts reflect on and recount the church's ministry and also propose change, all of which influences the practice of ministers, whether lay or ordained and are therefore part of the picture.

Finally, although the thrust of this study is towards qualitative research, there is still a need to look at the statistics of ministry, membership and

churches. Numbers, as well as words, can also tell their own story and a variety of sources of statistics will be used to enrich the other printed data. Looked at over a range of years, statistics can tell a story that can often be ignored.

2.5.2i Data analysis

As data is analysed, once again insights from both ethnography and action research come into play. Ethnographic study is looking for patterns – seeing connections, rather than making them. Agar suggests that it ‘wants to know about alternatives and disagreements – avoiding the usual quest for “normative’ order’. (Agar, 1996 p79) What is sought is a true picture, even if that picture looks untidy.

Helen Cameron’s ‘theology in four voices’ is a particularly useful tool to use in viewing the whole picture – texts as well as recorded conversations. Her four voices of theology – normative, formal, espoused, operant - are fairly self-explanatory and offer a way of teasing out the practice behind the words used sometimes out of habit and sometimes out of fear of accusations of heresy or unorthodoxy. As discussed earlier in this chapter, these four voices are not completely discrete, but combine and overlap in complex ways. This prism was applied to the literature that has a bearing on this study – the history and theology of ministry – as well as United Reformed Church papers and other writings.

As has already been stated, the tasks of data collection and analysis are likely to overlap and be repeated until a sufficiently coherent and credible picture is possible. The use of software for data analysis, nVivo, will not only facilitate this stage, but also potentially highlight areas that might be missed due to personal bias or blindness.

2.5.3 Dream

The Dreaming stage of Appreciative Inquiry works as an intermediary between the data collection and analysis of Discovery and the proposals of change in Design. It is essentially a collaborative stage, seeking to draw in other stakeholders. In this case, the other stakeholders form two main groups. Firstly, the ministers of the South Western Synod, not least those who have taken part in the research, will have the

opportunity to 'look in the mirror' and see if they recognise the picture they see there.

Then this picture of a synod's ministry will be tested out in other synods to assess how descriptive it is of ministry across the whole of the United Reformed Church.

2.5.4 Design

Traditionally theology was founded on the trinity of scripture, tradition and reason. The sixteenth century divine, Richard Hooker, is credited with establishing this balanced way of thinking in his volume *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, published in 1594.

(<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/hooker-the-works-of-richard-hooker-vol-1> accessed 10.5.2019) John Wesley, according to Outler, expanded this to a quadrilateral. (Outler 1964) Though the Bible remains the prime source for understanding God, it is through human lived experience that faith is mediated and this phenomenological approach, whilst still maintaining the balance with scripture, tradition and reason, transforms theology into a vital and creative discipline, rather than the more academic, prescriptive exercise that could be the case otherwise. The term 'quadrilateral' does not appear anywhere in Wesley's writings and Outler's thesis is disputed, not least in an article in the January 1991 edition of *Methodist History*¹¹. Though disputing its derivation, Campbell does concede that the quadrilateral is a very useful modern tool. Whatever its origins, it is this formulation that I intend to use when I come to constructing the theological framework of this thesis' title.

2.5.4a Scripture

One hopes that reason has been part of this study all along. Experience has undergirded the data collected from conversations; whilst the tradition has been contributed through texts and the contributions of those charged with keeping the United Reformed Church faithful to its heritage. Thus far,

¹¹ *The 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral': the story of a modern Methodist myth* by Ted A Campbell <http://archives.gcah.org/bitstream/handle/10516/5736/MH-1991-January-Campbell.pdf?sequence=1> [accessed 15 January 2019]

however, the piece missing from the jigsaw has been scripture. Wesley and the reformers all foregrounded scripture as a source for theology. *Sola scriptura* was the cry of the reformers, though Wesley might have preferred *prima scriptura*, which is perhaps more appropriate to his context, as that was his starting point. Nor has it been ignored here, as will become clear when the fieldwork is described in more detail. However, in keeping with the Appreciative Inquiry insistence on listening to as many voices as possible or reasonable, I felt it inappropriate simply to mine scripture for texts that would support a particular theory and have chosen to use different approach.

The method chosen to interrogate scripture here is Contextual Bible Study, which comes from South Africa via Scotland. It is not dissimilar from the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil, who believed that education and conscientization was central to the liberation of the poor. (Freire 1968) Others, in the South American liberation theology movement, used similar methods from a faith perspective, which offers, for example, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Cardenal 2010) as the product of a poorly educated rural community engaging with the Bible in very immediate ways. As its name suggests, Contextual Bible Study 'is a method that encourages readers to read the Bible in ways appropriate to their own contexts and which allow them to engage in dialogue with one another to address current concerns in the light of the biblical texts'. (Riches 2010, p3)

The choice of text is important and there are all kinds of ways of doing this, but for this research the texts studied will be selected from those chosen as significant by interviewees. The first stage is 'reading behind the text', in which the context is mined using traditional methods of literary and historical criticism to understand the culture of the time and discover what was happening. The text is then read again, possibly from a different translation, or retold to bring out different nuances. Finally, the text is read from in front, asking the question – how does this relate to the issue under investigation? Examples of the way this happens in practice can be found in a workbook published by the Scottish Bible Society in conjunction

with the Contextual Bible Study Group, now out of print, entitled *Conversations: the companion*.

As its provenance implies, this is a collaborative way of studying scripture. Even in the first stage, the knowledge of Biblical times does not have to be imparted simply by the leader, but space is given for a group to find out these things for themselves. When the method was brought into Britain it was to the housing schemes of Glasgow that it was first introduced. This makes it a good choice of method for this particular study that, as already been stated, seeks to hear all voices, whether strident or whispered.

2.5.4b Provocative Propositions

In Appreciative Inquiry, the Design stage culminates in the creation of Provocative Propositions (Watkins & Mohr 2001, p159). These are statements that declare what the future will look like, if the implications of the previous study are taken into account, and what the group wants to achieve. Such propositions should be provocative, that is they should stretch and challenge, but they should also be desired. They should be stated in positive terms but should also be grounded in the reality of possibility. Finally, they should be stated in the present tense, as though the change had already taken place. Roger Rowett suggests that they may be an optional component of this stage (Rowett 2012, p77) but in a study of this kind that is seriously engaged in the possibility of change, they are non-negotiable, setting out what Jane Reed calls 'unequivocal ambitions, with no caveats or conditions'. (Reed 2007, p33)

2.5.4c A new theological framework

A significant part of the Design stage will be the creation of a provisional theological framework, that is contemporary, inclusive and radical:

- provisional – recognising the constant need for revision as context changes
- contemporary – using the picture provided by ethnographic study
- inclusive – bringing together all ministry: ordained and lay, formally appointed/commissioned and local church volunteers

- radical – from our roots: biblically based, particularly referencing the Gospels, recognizably in the reformed tradition but not hide-bound.

It is this framework that will underpin the next stage – Delivery.

2.5.5 Delivery

The delivery stage will by the very nature of this study be the least developed. In the first instance, this is because I am not in a position to implement any proposal I might make to the denomination. As a pastorate-based Minister close to retirement, I do not have any personal influence to bear, but can simply pass on my questions and suggestions to the relevant committees.

However, there will be an opportunity to pose some further questions for the Church, following on from the proposed theological framework, and it may well be that certain ideas regarding the training, deployment and support of ministers, both lay and ordained, will suggest themselves. As the pastoral cycle makes clear, a response is not the end of the matter, but only a springboard to a new experience or question.

2.6 A bespoke methodology

What has emerged is a bespoke methodology that draws from a range of sources. Practical theology provides an overarching principle, bringing together practice and doctrine, allowing each to be critiqued by the other. The pastoral cycle, particularly Emanuel Larty's more sophisticated development, is the most useful framework for this work, in connection with the Appreciative Inquiry approach, with its foundations in positive psychology.

In addition, other tools are employed at different phases of the cycle. Ethnographic fieldwork is the means for collecting the data in the exploratory phase, with Appreciative Inquiry's SOAR analysis assisting in the analysis. Contextual Bible Study is key to the reflective phase and these two phases are placed into dialogue with each other. In the phase that Larty calls 'situational analysis of theology', a classical approach to the writing of theology, together with grounded theory to create provocative

proposals (from Appreciative Inquiry) offers a creative way of designing a new future. The final phase, named Response or Deliver, are beyond the scope of this work, though suggestions will be made in the concluding chapter.

2.7 Reflecting on methodology in practice – a personal memo

Developing a methodology is inevitably an academic exercise. In practice, things may turn out differently – what seemed like a good idea may be impracticable, time scales shift, people are not available, and so on. With the ethnographic study, as part of the Discover stage, one aim was to determine how to create as comprehensive a picture as possible. A series of conversations with individuals and groups – Ministers, elders, lay preachers, and others was the starting point. Then it was important that they were drawn from as wide a range of geographical contexts - rural, market town, city centre, suburban, coastal - and work settings– church, hospital, university, Synod office – as possible.

The selection of interviewees was important if an accurate representative picture of ministry across the synod was to be obtained. A grid (displayed again below) was drawn up that detailed the different contexts of ministry on the horizontal axis: city, (market) town, rural, seaside, hospital, university, local ecumenical partnership, other. ‘Other’ included synod staff, pioneer Minister and a county ecumenical officer. On the vertical axis were categories of ministry: full-time stipendiary, part-time stipendiary, non-stipendiary, retired, local church leader, elder, lay preacher, lay worker, informal. ‘Informal’ ministry included those responsible for catering/hospitality and music in the local church. Individuals were identified that would mean that most of the resulting squares – context/ministry – were filled where available, providing sufficient data to give a true picture. Existing groups were invited to take part in the research to add a different dimension. The result was that this was not exactly a random group of practitioners, but more of a purposive or strategic sampling. (Swinton and Mowat 2006, p69) They were selected for context, status and availability or willingness to be involved. They were

not selected for theological perspectives, as much because I did not always know this before the interview.

Interview matrix Kathryn M Price (student no. 986053344)

Context → Ministry ↓	City	(Market) Town	Rural	Seaside	Hospital	University	LEP	Other	Group interview
Stipendiary		SM1 SM2		SM3(+gm) GM1B (g) SM7	HC1 HC2		SM6	SM5 SM4	GM1
PT Stipendiary	GM1D(g)	SM5	X			GM1CDg)		SL	
NSM	GM1E(g)	NSM2	NSM4		NSM3			NSM1	
Retired			RM1					GM1A (g)	
Local church leader	LM3								
Elder	GE1		G01A(g)						GE1 G01
Lay Preacher	GLP1F (g) GLP1C (g)	GO1B(g)	LP1 GLP1E(g)	GLP1D (g) GLP1B(g) GLP1A(g)					GLP1
Lay worker				LM2	JK (g)			LM1	
Informal		LM4							

Colours indicate areas of Synod (g) interviewed as part of group deleted squares = not relevant/appropriate

There were in most categories alternative ministers who could be invited to take part. In the event no-one approached, refused to take part.

At the same time as the interviews were being arranged, the questions, or protocol, were developed, this being a semi-formal interview technique with four main questions and prompting questions and comments to move the conversation along in between. The conversation protocol was created along Appreciative Inquiry lines. There were four basic questions –

1. What effective ministry is happening in this church? (based on the principle that in every church something good is happening)

I was looking for stories of who is doing what and how they know it is effective.

I was conscious that by opening with that question, their definition of ‘ministry’ will be illustrated. It was interesting how some immediately spoke of the work of the minister of Word & Sacrament and needed a little

prompting to include ministry of the whole people of God. Ministers themselves were not immune to this, beginning with their own experience, but bringing in the ministry of others along the way. Part way through the answer to this question, I asked if they had a personal definition of ministry.

2. What might be better?

This was expanded by explaining what was intended by the word 'better': What could simply be better? Is something being missed? What is not quite reaching the mark? What has stopped working? What might be done differently or not at all?

Are there missed opportunities or some things they just can't do?

I encouraged my conversation partners to 'think outside the box' and most of them readily took up the challenge.

3. What steps are needed to respond to the answers to question 2?

What small things could you do now? What resources are needed for the bigger steps – personnel, money, training? What challenges do you foresee?

This was a tricky question, because it is straying into a different stage of the research. However I was unlikely to get a 'second bite of the cherry', so it made sense to ask it, though I needed to make it clear that I was not there in the guise of 'fairy godmother'! Although the prime reason for the meeting was the invitation to take part in my research, my then role as Synod Education and Learning Enabler meant I was in a position to talk to them about training and I indicated that once I had processed the conversation – transcribed, etc – I would contact them with suggestions, if appropriate, which I did in fact do. Having that relationship was instrumental in getting people to accept the invitation, but it did require an awareness of the different strands of conversation that it could lead to.

4. What might your church be like then? - What picture or model comes into your mind? What Bible story would be its inspiration? What hymn might be its 'anthem'?

Following discussion of the first interviews with my supervisors, this last question was changed to -

4. Does your model of ministry correspond to an image of God?

What might that be?

This was supplemented by asking for a Biblical text, that inspired and resourced their own ministry.

The interviews were conducted in three distinct groups of setting. Most Stipendiary Ministers and the group of Ministers were interviewed in a manse. Some took place in the place of work – office, church hall – and two of the groups met in the Synod office. The manse-based interviews were more informal in feel and more conversational, while the others had more of the formal interview about them.

Most of the conversations lasted around an hour. I had indicated in the initial letter that it would take about an hour and a half and had no difficulty sticking to that. No-one objected to being recorded. In two cases the recording failed completely and with one group interview it was not always easy to hear speakers, because I was using my phone and the microphone is not multi-directional. However, I took copious notes each time in any case and writing up as soon as possible afterwards meant I was able to remember things I had not written down.

Though I always talked of them as ‘conversations’, it was obvious from playing back the recordings that I was more engaged in an active listening exercise, rarely offering my own thoughts or experiences, but letting them have the space to talk, leaving silences where it seemed helpful. Listening to the conversations as I transcribed them was a significant part of the process. I was able to concentrate more on what was said and also found some of the pauses longer than I had remembered. I transcribed verbatim, so that when I read them through, I was able to recall more vividly the actual conversation.

A study day for all Ministers in the South Western Synod was arranged shortly after the interviews ended, offering an opportunity to reflect back some of the data and find out if the emerging picture was familiar. At the same meeting an exercise was carried out that led to a list of Aspirations

for ministry in the Synod. These sessions were recorded simply by my note-taking.

The Contextual Bible Study (CBS) groups were held after I changed Synods, which has the unsought benefit of broadening the obtainable picture of ministry. North Wales Ministers and the elders of my pastorate were the participants and all three groups – one of Ministers and two of elders – expressed appreciation of the exercise. The texts offered for study were those chosen by the earlier interviewees as inspirational for their ministry. The stated context for the CBS groups was ministry, which meant that it was not difficult to make links between one group of Ministers' selection of texts and another's exploration of them. Once again, the conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

As with the paired conversations, a Synod day for Ministers offered the opportunity to widen the Contextual Bible Study stage of the study. Small groups were introduced to the CBS method, invited to choose one of the texts and then left to organise themselves, reporting back after half an hour. The discussion was naturally limited, compared with the hour or so allowed to the recorded groups, and the quality of notes depended on the note-taker in each group. Notwithstanding its limitations in this way, the exercise proved useful to the study.

The final part of the data collection was to be found through inviting colleagues in the Training and Development Officers Network to comment on the picture of ministry in the South Western Synod and reflect on how it related to their own Synod's ministry. A first draft of the analysis of the paired conversations was sent with a request to read it and respond with their thoughts on whether or not it reflected their own experience and with any evidence they might have. Six people responded with very positive comments and, for the most part, agreement that ministry was very similar across the denomination – or at least the parts responding. There was, however, little actual formal evidence to support their comments.

2.8 Summary

In this chapter I have explained the methodology used for this research, evaluating the different frameworks and tools used in this bespoke methodology. Fundamentally a work of practical theology, the methodological framework is created by blending Larty's version of the pastoral cycle with Appreciative Inquiry. A variety of different tools have been employed to carry out each stage of the research:

- Definition/Experience – thesis proposal
- Discover/Situational analysis – ethnographic fieldwork (including Appreciative Inquiry paired conversations and SOAR), literature review
- Dream/Theological analysis – Contextual Bible Study
- Design/Situational analysis of theology – grounded theory, provocative proposals, theological reflection
- Delivery/Response - conclusions

I have also added some comments on that methodology in practice and any adjustments that became necessary.

In the next chapter I will trace the history of ministry in the United Reformed Church from the Reformation, through the creation of the URC and consider the contemporary state of ministry through examination of debates in the councils of the church and reports prepared for it, relevant statistics, as well as less formal sources, such as articles and letters in *Reform* magazine.

In the succeeding chapter, I will present the results of the ethnographic fieldwork I carried out. Through recorded and transcribed paired conversations and Contextual Bible Study groups, I construct a picture of ministry in the URC as it is currently practised. This represents the first real appearance of the *operant* voice and explores the strengths of current ministry practice, as well as opportunities for development, aspirations of ministers and the resources needed.

In Chapter Five I will then place the two data sets in dialogue to look for points of agreement and dissonance in order to discern the real issues for URC ministry today.

3. Reading about ministry

3.1 Preamble

My research project does not appear out of thin air or a vacuum, so it is reasonable to assume that my quest for a contemporary theological framework for ministry arose from the current picture of ministry in the United Reformed Church. I am not alone in this. A review of discussions, debates and resolutions at General Assembly and Mission Council, later in this chapter, will quickly pick up the issues causing anxiety - deployment, or the apparent diminution in the number of ordained stipendiary ministers available for local churches; the locus of work and retirement age of non-stipendiary ordained ministers; arrangements for local leadership; addressing the responsibilities of elders, who are also ordained. The Ministers' Facebook Forum page¹² chronicles the stresses of modern pastoral ministry. One particularly strain that recurs frequently is the growing role of Minister as manager and responsible for an increasing number of compliance issues connected with safeguarding, employment, charity law, and so on. This source is particularly interesting in that, as a closed page, Ministers feel more able to express themselves honestly than in a more open environment.

My own experience includes a time as a Synod training officer and as such, I met with colleagues from the twelve other Synods and it became clear that each Synod was trying individually to deal with the question of how best to provide ministry to each congregation. This was one of the founding commitments of the United Reformed Church:

The worship of the local church is an expression of the worship of the whole people of God. In order that this may be clearly seen, the United Reformed Church shall (a) take steps to ensure that so far as possible ordained ministers of the Word and Sacraments are readily available to every local church . . . (Basis of Union, para 24)

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1521226424814180/>

However, as congregations have become smaller and so unable to cover the total costs of a minister, some way of sharing with one or more other congregations has had to be explored. Different Synods have come up with a range of ideas - group pastorates, team ministry across a city, local lay leadership - with no one pattern across the denomination.¹³ This is leading to varying levels of anxiety amongst stipendiary ministers. Those whose primary calling was to pastoral ministry in relationship with a congregation cannot understand how that is possible in a pastorate of three, four, five or more churches. Those who feel more open to an enabling, supporting ministry can feel frustrated by colleagues and congregations that are resistant to change.

This, then, is the starting point - a denomination across four nations¹⁴ that actually operates in thirteen differing ways; that is grappling with the same issues as other denominations - falling membership rolls leading to reduced financial resources; that still feels its commitment to provide ministry to all congregations. It is important to begin by looking at where the United Reformed Church has come from - the three different traditions of the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches and the Disciples of Christ and their subtly different understandings of ministry. It is important because there are still significant voices from these traditions involved in the current debates nearly fifty years since the first union. An added dimension is the ecumenical commitment that has been significant to the United Reformed Church from its inception.

The current position of ministry then involves the 'what' - how is ministry defined or envisaged in the official statements of the United Reformed

¹³ For example, South Western Synod and Mersey Synod have policies for appointing local church leaders - <https://www.urcsouthwest.org.uk/media/Appointing-Local-Church-Leaders-November-2016.pdf> , <https://www.urcmerseysynod.org.uk/training.htm> ; Yorkshire Synod has created teams of Ministers to serve 'Mission and Care groups' - https://urcyorkshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Synod_Deployment_Policy_091010.pdf ; North Western Synod is forming 'Missional Partnerships' of groups of churches served by teams of ministers – e.g. the April 2019 vacancy notices lists one Missional Partnership of 15 churches to be served by 3 Ministers, with 1 vacancy and another of 11 churches, also to be served by 3 Ministers, with 2 current vacancies.

¹⁴ England, Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Man

Church - and the 'how' - what does that ministry look like as practised today. Exploring the current concerns and issues, as exposed in the General Assembly and Mission Council reports and records and other debates will reveal how the Church is dealing with the situation.

3.2 Reformed ministry

The Reformation might seem to be a good starting point, when looking at the practice of ministry in a Reformed church. However, it would also be important to have at least a brief glance at what exactly was needing to be reformed, the new pattern being, to a large extent, a direct consequence of what was being rejected.

There is general agreement that reform was needed. Owen Chadwick begins his overview thus:

At the beginning of the sixteenth century everyone that mattered in the Western Church was crying out for reformation. For a century and more Western Europe had sought for reform of the Church in head and members and had failed to find it.

If you asked people what they meant when they said that the Church was in need of reform, they would not have found it easy to agree. (Chadwick 1972, p11)

Scottish historian Gordon Donaldson agrees with the general thrust, but suggests that there were specific, and generally agreed, complaints:

All could see that much was in need of reform. But it was of 'discipline', of the 'lives' of clergy, of their 'manners' and their 'morals' that reformation was all but unanimously craved. (Donaldson 1960, p1)

Both writers agree on the need to reform the ministry; absentee priests, bad landlords, the practice of selling indulgences, clergy living the high life, celibate priests with known mistresses - all these are cited in any account of the times¹⁵.

This may be too one-sided a picture. Eamon Duffy, whilst not claiming that the priesthood was perfect or blameless, presents a more positive view

¹⁵ See, for example, Calvin 1536 & 1559, Donaldson 1960, Chadwick 1972, Fergusson 2002

and points out the teaching aids available for local priests. Mostly based on one entitled *Oculus sacerdotis*, produced by William of Pagula (Boyle 1955) in the early fourteenth century, they may have been mainly taken up by educated urban priests, though the evidence for that is inconclusive. The *Cura Clericalis*, reflecting the received wisdom on the subject, defined four roles for the priest: a celebrant of the masses (for which a good knowledge of Latin was necessary), minister of other sacraments, confessor and teacher of the people. (Duffy 2005, p57) Significantly, despite there being some two hundred surviving pre-Reformation pulpits, preaching does not feature in this list and anecdotal evidence of the period would concur that it was not a well-recognised feature of the priesthood. Peter Marshall is also less inclined to wholesale criticism:

. . . the assumption that the Reformation was ‘inevitable’ looks, at the very least, debatable, in the light of new research emphasising the flexibility and vigour of late medieval Catholicism. (Marshall 2009, p5)

Diarmaid MacCulloch also points out that no historian is ever truly objective, particularly those who are members of Catholic or Protestant or Reformed churches today (MacCulloch 2017). It is well, therefore, to be alert to bias and aware that the picture was not a simple one.

As in most revolutions, however, what is rejected shapes what is to come and a new form of church leadership would appear to have been required. Again, most writers acknowledge the socio-political aspects of the Reformation. Given the nature of society at the time, with church and state intertwined in so many ways, it could not have been otherwise.

Chadwick takes again a pan-European view:

In Saxony the impetus to the Reformation was first religious and then political. In France and Holland and Scotland the Reformation began as a religious movement which was inevitably caught up into national politics. But this process was not universal. Some reformation began because the nation was developing, and religious change affected the development. In Denmark and in Sweden the Reformation was more a political revolution with religious consequences than a religious revolution with political consequences. England was unique in its Reformation, unique in the Church established in the consequence of the Reformation.

The English Reformation was emphatically a political revolution . . . (Chadwick 1972, p97)

Writing about Scotland, he proposes that English political desires influenced the outcome north of the border. (Chadwick 1972, p171)

Donaldson, focusses specifically on Scotland, and chronicles the events and circumstances running up to this conclusion, which was some years after the church in the rest of Europe had begun to change. He concludes that not least among the causes in Scotland were the actions of the king himself, in nominating his own illegitimate sons to significant posts with papal compliance. (Donaldson 1960, p37)

So much for the need and desire for reform, but what did it mean for priesthood and clergy? Here there are both primary and secondary sources to refer to. John Calvin and John Knox both committed their thoughts to paper and, in addition, the founding documents of the Westminster Confession (Thompson 1990, p10-60) and the Savoy Declaration (Thompson 1990, p61-117) are still referred to in the United Reformed Church. These are the documents to be treated here as primary sources.

Calvin's earlier *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, dated 1536, is much shorter than the many-volumed 1559 version, but it is in many respects a livelier read as the writer's passion for reform comes through in his condemnation of what he sees to be wrong. The later edition gives us a more thoroughly worked out scheme for reform, not just of the church but of the civic authorities too. So in 1536, Calvin, in the chapter entitled *The five false sacraments*, spends much time listing, in quite scathing language, the ways in which the church has gone astray, turning finally to his proposal:

Having properly considered these matters, we are now ready to define the office of presbyter, who are to be included in the order of presbyters, or rather what the order itself in general is. The office is to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments . . . A bishop is he who, called to the ministry of word and sacraments, carries out his office in the good faith. I call bishops and presbyters indiscriminately 'ministers of the church'. Order is the calling itself. (Calvin 1536, p166)

There follows much about who should ordain and how, but it is in 1559 that he dedicates a whole chapter to 'the teachers and ministers of the church; their election and office' and it is clear from the start that this is one of the cornerstones of Calvin's reform:

Whoever studies to abolish this order and kind of government of which we speak, or disparages it as of minor importance, plots the devastation, or rather the ruin and destruction of the Church. (Calvin 1559, p317)

Calvin reduces Paul's list of offices to two - pastors and teachers. The other three - apostle, prophet and evangelist - are, he states, 'extraordinary' - called into being at a specific time and not to be repeated. He differentiates between his two offices thus:

Between (the two), I think, there is this difference, that teachers preside not over discipline, or the administration of the sacraments, or admonition, or exhortation, but the interpretation of Scripture only, in order that pure and sound doctrine may be maintained among believers. (Calvin 1559, p319)

The terms pastor, presbyter and bishop (at least in translation) are interchangeable for Calvin. The qualities needed are those cited in Paul's letter to Titus¹⁶. First and foremost though is the call to ministry and God only calls when the candidate is ready. (Calvin 1559, -p323-324)

Citing the practice of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch¹⁷, and quoting Cyprian, Calvin recommends election by the whole congregation:

Those examples show that the ordination of a priest behoved not to take place, unless under the consciousness of the people assisting, so that ordination was just and legitimate which was vouched by the testimony of all. (Calvin 1559, p325)

This election, and ordination, is confirmed by the laying on of hands:

for it is certainly useful, that by such a symbol the dignity of the ministry should be commended to the people, and he who

¹⁶ Titus 1.5-9

¹⁷ Acts 13.1-3

is ordained, reminded that he is no longer his own, but is bound in service to God and the Church. (Calvin 1559, p326)

Calvin's influence on John Knox can be seen in his self-description:

For considering my selfe rather cald of God to instruct the ignorant, comfort the sorrowfull, confirme the weake, and rebuke the proud, by tong and livelye voice in these corrupt days, than to compose the booke for the age to come, seeing that so much is written (and that by men of singular condition), and yet so little well observed; I deemed to containe my selfe within the bondes of that vocation, whereunto I found my selfe especially called . . . (Preface to the sermon on 1 Timothy 4, cited in Torrance 1996, p2)

Torrance points out that notwithstanding this rather self-effacing description, Knox took on the task of reforming not just the church, but the whole of society. (Torrance 1996, p3) Jane Dawson also stresses Knox's sense of vocation:

From the start of his ministerial career Knox appreciated the double associations of 'call' as both the summons to the preacher by the congregation and the preacher's voice in his sermons guiding his congregational flock with the Word of God. (Dawson 2015, p45)

The significance of Calvin's thought in the history of the reformed churches cannot be underestimated and warrants the time given to his writing and that of his contemporaries. As witness to this importance, there is a continually growing library of books dedicated to the analysis of Calvin's ideas and those of his fellow reformers, as well as biographies and newly annotated editions of the primary texts. In the *Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology*, Steinmetz, writing on Calvin's views of priesthood, states:

Calvin agreed with the general Protestant rejection of the hierarchical priesthood. Catholic theology taught that ordination conferred a power upon ordinands, which they shared with Christ and with all other priests, but which they did not share with the laity . . . Calvin agreed with Luther that the common priesthood of believers meant that all Christians had the right by virtue of their baptism to preach and preside at the sacraments. There was no difference in kind between ministers and laypersons, but only a difference of office and function in the church. (Steinmetz 2004, p128)

However, Parker, in the series on *Outstanding Christian Thinkers*, points out that Calvin saw ministry as a 'tool wielded by the hand of the Lord', noting that:

it is the word 'Lord' that is stressed in the first sentence.
(Parker 1995, p135)

God alone rules the church, but

because he is not visibly present with his people he makes use of the ministry of men as a sort of 'vicarious activity', a phrase Calvin explains as God using a tool like a workman. God could do this work directly without the human tools, or he could use angels to do it; but it is for the Church's advantage that he should use human ministry. (Parker 1995, p135)

This does give the ordained ministry an elevated position in the church, priesthood of all believers notwithstanding. Peel agrees:

There is no undermining of the importance of minister in the name of 'the priesthood of all believers' in the writings of the Genevan reformer! In fact, quite the reverse is the case . . .
(Peel 2002, p242)

Avis looks wider and concludes that other Reformers share this view, citing Bucer, and noting that English Reformers, such as Cranmer, Jewel and Hooker also agree. (Avis 1982, p93) Fergusson too sees Calvin's account of the ordained ministry as a 'high doctrine' of supreme importance to the Church. (Fergusson 2002, p25) Or as David Peel puts it:

The notion that one can have a church without a minister is a contradiction in terms. (Peel 2002, p242)

This idea is one that will be returned to.

Calvin also established forums for the support and also accountability of both ordained ministers and the laity in his Company of Pastors and Consistory. The Company of Pastors met weekly, led by Calvin himself as moderator. This had the effect of creating a powerful group of like-minded men. As Bruce Gordon comments:

To his opponents he seemed severe and unrelenting, but among most of his colleagues he commanded respect,

particularly as the majority had been appointed by him.
(Gordon 2009, p129)

It has been necessary to take time to explore Calvin's thought and practice, as it permeates the documents that formed the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches - the Westminster Confession and the Savoy declaration. Here we discern the *formal* voice of theology at its purest. David M Thompson has gathered these, together with other foundational documents from the heritage of the United Reformed Church.

The Westminster Confession of 1647 represents the most complete laying down of Presbyterian thought. It touches on all aspects of the life of the Church. It follows Calvin in advocating a high doctrine of ministry:

There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel, that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained. (Thompson 1990, p39)

Appended is *The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government*, effectively a handbook on how to run the Church. Officers of the Church include both pastors and teachers, in line with Calvin, and the presbytery is to be made up of Ministers of the Word, alongside elders, which it calls 'church-governors'. These presbyteries, which combine the main features of Calvin's 'Company of Pastors' and Consistory, are the bodies which take responsibility for ordination:

it is very requisite, that no single congregation, that can conveniently associate, do assume to itself all and sole power in ordination. (Thompson 1990, p54)

In the final paragraphs, reference is made to the 'present exigencies', being the English Civil War, at which time 'many ministers are to be ordained for the service of the armies and navy' and where there are "many congregations where there is no minister at all". (Thompson 1990, p59) Here we have possibly the first mention of military chaplaincy, but also a suggestion that there are specific circumstances from time to time that necessitate a bending of the rules.

The Savoy Declaration of 1658 is less well-known, even among Congregationalists, for whom it holds a position similar to that of the Westminster Confession for Presbyterians. It is in many respects similar, the underlying theology being the same; but it is in the passages that refer to the organisation and order of the church that differences emerge. When it makes a statement about the two recognised sacraments, it agrees that only ministers may administer them, but refers to them as 'lawfully called', rather than 'lawfully ordained' (Thompson 1990, p109) and does not go into the detail of ordination as the previous document does.

3.3 The making of the United Reformed Church

In his account of the traditions that came together in the United Reformed Church, Tony Tucker writes of the responsibilities of congregations, in the Congregationalist tradition, in discerning the gifts of ministry in members, in exploring the experience and competence of potential ministers and of being a church without a Minister if there was no-one suitable:

This did not mean that early Congregationalists sat lightly to the ministry, but it was not essential to the church . . . It was better for a church to have no minister than to have one imposed upon the congregation who lacked the charismatic gifts of ministry. It followed from these principles that the Church was antecedent to the ministry but not that the ministry was an unnecessary appendage. (Tucker 2003, p13)

More recently, at different points in the twentieth century, Reformed theologians have brought the principles up to date, whilst reminding faithful to their origins. Some of these have become primary sources in their own right. One of the foremost of these, at least in the United Reformed Church, is Peter Taylor Forsyth. Peel lists him with Calvin, Barth, Schleiermacher and Moltmann as having had a lasting influence on the denomination. (Peel 2002, p7)

Forsyth held a high view of ministry. He is particularly scathing of:

'those who look on the minister simply as one of the members of the Church - the talking or the presiding

member. They think anything else spoils him as a brother. They believe a Church could go on without a minister, only not so well, with less decency and order. (Forsyth 1947, p132)

The introduction to his chapter, entitled 'The ministry sacramental', listing the subjects covered, outlines his position:

The first effectiveness of the ministry is its effectiveness for the Church, not for the public. It is world-reforming, but it is Church-making. It does not so much act on the world as provide a Church that does. The ministry is effective as it is creative and develops the new birth. The minister not the talking brother but the divine messenger and trustee of the Church's Gospel - sacramental and not merely functional. He is an apostle, not a mere disciple. His relation to the unity of the Church. The New Testament the real successor of the Apostles. The ministers are first called by its action on their soul. The minister is surrogate of the apostle rather than successor. The first Apostolate incommunicable. The continuity in this message and not in the order. The ministry effective only as it is sacramental. What are Means of Grace? Four functions of the ministry examined:- 1. Preaching; 2. Pastoral; 3. Liturgical; 4. Philanthropic or social. The effectiveness of the people essential for that of the ministry. The pulpit not a pedestal for a genius but service to a flock of Christ. The ministry has to make Churches more than impress the public. (Forsyth 1947, p130)

The use of the adjective 'sacramental' for ministry is interesting and emphasises that ministry is not merely a job or a post, but a divine vocation, and although Forsyth uses the collective noun 'ministry', it is clear that he is writing about 'Ministers'.

Jürgen Moltmann disagrees with Forsyth quite fundamentally, starting from a position of viewing adult baptism as the significant 'call' event in an individual's life. He also believes that the practice of infant baptism has had a deleterious effect on the practice of ministry:

Ordination, with its conferring of a particular charge, cannot enter into competition with baptism and cannot outdo it. (Moltmann 1977, p308)

The special stress on ordination and a sacred ministry - to the point of raising it to the rank of sacrament - apparently

always crops up when the church goes over the to the practice of infant baptism. (Moltmann 1977, p314)

For Moltmann there are a range of ministries or assignments, which together form the ministry of the Church:

They can be carried out by men and women, by the married and the unmarried, by the theologically trained and people without theological training. They can be exercised by individuals and groups. None of these circumstances and aptitudes amount to a law. The community must continually ask itself how its messianic commission can be fulfilled in its particular situation and with its particular powers. (Moltmann 1977, p308)

Already it is clear that the *formal* theological voices, those which were significant in the founding of the United Reformed Church, were in disagreement and there would need to be debate, compromise and accommodation if anything approaching a *normative* voice was to come through.

More recently, Peel, clearly more sympathetic to Forsyth than Moltmann, has been keen to unpick the popular confusions that arise from terms commonly used - 'priesthood of all believers', 'the ministry of the whole people of God' - and affirm the continued calling of God to individuals:

. . . there is a less helpful understanding of 'the whole people of God', one which has become very popular in recent years as some Christians rather understandably have felt compelled to move away from hierarchical and authoritarian patterns of Christian ministry. They talk about 'every member ministry' and stress the way that we all have gifts to be used in God's service. Regrettably, there is little evidence in church history to support this view. It confuses 'ministry' with 'vocation', and all too easily tends to allow leadership vacuums to appear at the heart of congregations. (Peel 2003, p98)

Alan Sell, another URC theologian, partially agrees, but because he sees the church as a collective enterprise. For Sell, 'the priesthood of all believers' does not mean all are priests, but that together the saints, as he refers to the membership, are a corporate identity. (Sell 2014, p7)

As it came into being in 1972, the United Reformed Church was compelled to find a way to combine two and then, in 1976, three views of ministry¹⁸, which though having foundations in the same Reformation era, had developed in different ways. Tony Tucker records some of the discussions and negotiations:

Whereas Presbyterians would forgo the sacrament if an ordained minister were not available to preside, Congregationalists had by this time forgotten their ancient tradition that the celebration by a particular church of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper required that the church be furnished with officers duly appointed for the purpose. The Congregationalists also had in their ranks an informal order of *lay pastors* . . . (who) acted as *de facto* ministers to the mostly rural congregations which they served. They exercised the functions of the ministers of Word and Sacrament, and in some cases were given - or assumed - the courtesy title of 'reverend'. (Tucker 2003, p104)

So it was that in 1976, the Joint Committee for Negotiations between Churches of Christ and the United Reformed Church wished to uphold the witness of the Churches of Christ that:

a plurality of ministers¹⁹ has been a matter of principle in Churches of Christ and not merely an expedient to overcome a shortage of full-time ministers. (Tucker 2003, p112)

A discordant choir of voices indeed! At each stage of its development there has been needed a degree of diplomacy to create a harmonised whole from the various different voices, both *formal* and *normative*.

3.4 A commitment to ecumenism

In 1992 a working party was set up by the Ministries Department of the United Reformed Church at the request of the 1992 General Assembly. Its remit arose from the Assembly's request for further consideration of the

¹⁸ in 1972, it was the Congregational Church (England & Wales) and the Presbyterian Church of England that came together. The Churches of Christ joined in 1981 and in 2000 the Congregational Union of Scotland became the fourth member denomination. It should be noted that there were at each union congregations that did not join the new denomination and formed new independent groupings.

¹⁹ in this case 'minister' is a term that does not exclusively refer to full-time stipendiary ministers

themes in the Patterns of Ministry report of 1991. The Working Party began its work with a study of the theological basis for the understanding of ministry, producing a stated Theology of Ministry, which appears in the interim report produced in 1994 as Appendix A. The Doctrine and Worship Committee had been asked specifically to relate *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (the Lima text 1982) to the relevant sections of the Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church. The Working Party, in fulfilling this request, also considered the Anglican/Reformed document *God's Reign and Our Unity*, published in 1984.

Accordingly references in the theological statement are rarely to scripture, but to the ecumenical documents and the Basis of Union, and the tone of the document is one in which the writers strive to align the United Reformed Church's understanding of ministry with that of the World Council of Churches and the Anglican-Reformed International Commission:

1.5. The task of the Church is to proclaim the Gospel to the world and to be a foretaste of the joy and glory of God's rule by its witness and service (BEM 4, GRU 73) Christ thus continues his ministry in and through the Church (URC Basis 19) (URC 1994, p30)

3.9. The United Reformed Church can readily accept the statement in BEM 13 - "The chief responsibility of the ordained ministry is to assemble and build up the body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating the sacraments and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry". (URC 1994, p34)

This emphasis on ecumenical agreement represents the newest tradition of the United Reformed Church. In 1972 it was the first, and remains the only, organic union of two or more denominations. The hope of those pioneers who engineered such a feat was that it would be the beginnings of a movement and in welcoming in the Churches of Christ in 1981, it seemed as though their hopes were on the way to being fulfilled. The intention was never to settle as a denomination, but to draw in more and more denominations in order to become the one Church in the United Kingdom. The present state of affairs with ecumenism in the doldrums is a

source of great sadness for some of the first generation of United Reformed Church members.

The importance of ecumenism lingers in a number of ways. Locally, the United Reformed Church is the denomination most represented in Local Ecumenical Partnerships, where they are partnered by Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists, Roman Catholics and in less formal partnerships provide hosting and support for congregations of specific ethnic or nations groups. For example, Redland Park United Reformed Church, in Bristol, hosts a Korean church and the Korean Presbyterian minister is sponsored by the United Reformed Church as a Special Category Minister. There are currently 247 ministers of other denominations²⁰ serving the United Reformed Church with certificates of limited service²¹, or as ministers of LEPs, ecumenical pastorates or in colleges. The General Assembly honours ecumenical guests with the right not only to speak in debate, but also to vote and thus shape the future of the United Reformed Church. A resolution passed at General Assembly asked that each agenda of the United Reformed Church be headed with the words - 'What are the ecumenical implications of this agenda?' and though the words have not recently appeared in writing, the spirit still lingers.

Here then is one *normative* theology voice, enshrined in The Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church²², read at every ordination or induction:

We affirm our intention
to go on praying and working,
with all our fellow Christians,
for the visible unity of the Church
in the way Christ chooses,
so that people and nations
may be led to love and serve God
and praise him more and more for ever.

²⁰ The largest group is from the Methodist Church but other denominations represented are the Church of England, Church in Wales, Church of Scotland, Presbyterian Church of Wales, Congregational Federation, Baptist Union, Salvation Army, Moravian Church, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian Church in Korea

²¹ normally reviewed on a three yearly basis

²² Version II, as approved by the General Assembly, 1990

That this commitment is more than a form of words used on special occasions is evident in the life of the local churches. The *operant* theological voice clearly states that for the United Reformed Church, having a good relationship with other denominations both locally and on the wider stage is important.

Ministers trained at Northern College, Manchester, and Westminster College, Cambridge, will study alongside students from other denominations because both colleges are members of ecumenical federations. Additionally, it is normal practice for students at Northern College to have a first year placement with a church of a different denomination and a second year placement in a chaplaincy setting, most of which are by their very natures inter-denominational. The impact of this on the local congregations they go on to serve, as well as the number of Local Ecumenical Partnerships on the ground, can be seen by their involvement local Churches Together Groups, or Cytûns in Wales. In Scotland too, local United Reformed Churches play their part in local ecumenical groups, though ministers trained in Scotland have less experience of learning alongside people from other denominations. This involvement in interdenominational activity is also seen at the structural level - Revd Dr David Cornick, recently retired as General Secretary of Churches Together in England, is a minister of the United Reformed Church and there are URC ministers also working with Cytûn (Churches Together) in Wales and in other ecumenical posts. With Revd Dr Susan Durber as Convenor of the Faith and Order Committee of the World Council of Churches, it can be said that for a small denomination it punches above its weight on the world church scene.

3.5 Contemporary United Reformed Church ministry

The Lord Jesus Christ continues his ministry in and through the Church, the whole people of God called and committed to his service and equipped by him for it. This service is given by worship, prayer, proclamation of the Gospel, and Christian witness; by mutual and outgoing care and responsibility; and by obedient discipleship in the whole of daily life, according to the gifts and opportunities given to

each one. The preparation and strengthening of its members for such ministry and discipleship shall always be a major concern of the United Reformed Church. (*Basis of Union*, para 19)

So begins the section on 'Ministry in the United Reformed Church' in the *Basis of Union*, the foundational document of the URC. In the subsequent paragraphs, it speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ giving particular gifts to equip particular ministers and lists the ministry of the Word and Sacraments and also that of eldership, both categories of minister being ordained. There is to be recognition of all recognised ministries of the uniting churches and the *Basis of Union* also looks to the future:

. . . The United Reformed Church shall determine from time to time what other ministries may be required and which of them should be recognised as ministries in the whole church. (*Basis of Union*, para 23)

An introduction to the selection, training and ordination of Ministers and elders will be found in the *Appendices*. The *Basis of Union* also stipulates the promises to be made by new members, elders and Ministers at their reception, ordination and induction, but only the Ministers make specific promises regarding the tasks s/he is being called to carry out:

Do you promise to fulfil the duties of your charge faithfully to lead the church in worship,
to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments,
to exercise pastoral care and oversight,
to take your part in the councils of the Church,
and to give leadership to the Church in its mission to the world?
(*Basis of Union*, Schedule C, question 7)

A footnote indicates that the presiding minister may modify this question to fit the kind of ministry to which the candidate has been called. Here, then, is an explicit admission that there is more to ordained ministry than the traditional pastoral role, one Minister serving a congregation (or two or three), a canny combination of *normative* and *operant* voices.

Rather more fleshed out in its expectations of ministry is the grid produced by the Training Committee in 1993:

A Minister of Word and Sacraments is a person

who is	who knows about	who has skills in
Practical theologian	The Bible, theology inc. Reformed theology, social analysis	Theological reflection
Disciple	(own) living tradition; how s/he learns	Communicating the faith
Worshipper	Liturgy; strengths and weaknesses of tradition	Leading and enabling worship of high quality; Spiritual direction
Collaborator	Group dynamics decision- making processes	Team building; delegation; communication; administration; Working in partnership
Educator	How people learn; own education needs; resources and researching	Teaching all ages and all kinds of people
Missioner in a plural world	Persons in relations;	Personal relationships;

	inspiring visions setting goals, carrying them through and evaluating them	understanding plural contexts; social and political action
Companion and listener	Own vulnerability; being as well as doing; rootedness and commitment; incarnation as a model of ministry	Communication: Skills in empathy - compassion, listening, being alongside
Communicator	Verbal and written communication skill; information technology	Preaching; Public prayer

This paper has been the starting point for a number of developments. The Scottish United Reformed and Congregational College produced its own list of core competencies in an undated paper and offers the following roles:

- Applied Theologian
- Worshipper/worship leader
- Biblical student
- Disciple
- Missioner
- Educator
- Manager, Organiser

- Pastor

Other headings on the grid are - Underpinning knowledge, Skills, Contexts, Qualities, Learning/teaching and assessment, giving a clear framework for the college syllabus.

Similarly, Northern College, when setting up its Faith in Living Course in 1998 produced a Practice of Ministry checklist of skills and learning objectives, which an ordinand would be expected to work through on placements. The headings here were

- Education, growth
- Special occasions
- Leading worship
- The church community
- Children and young people
- Meetings
- Mission
- Church in society
- Management and Reflection

Most recently the Education and Learning Committee produced a revision of the 1993 paper, which was presented to General Assembly as part of a resolution in 2016. This is reproduced overleaf. The Committee was seeking permission for them to work with the Ministries Committee to prepare a paper for a subsequent Mission Council to agree.

A minister of Word and Sacraments in the United Reformed Church is a person:

who is:	who lives:	who knows about and understands:	who has skills in:
A faithful disciple	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • committed to Christ • a life of prayer, worship and witness • within the community of the church • with integrity, discipline, joy and commitment • in good, flourishing and wholesome relationship with others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • his/her own experience of life and faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • giving their own account of the Gospel
A theologian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a life shaped and being transformed by the Bible • inhabiting a particular tradition, but also within the ecumenical, world and intercultural community of the Church • in a healthy tension between received tradition and present experience and expressions • with mind and heart ready to question and to trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Bible • the Tradition (including its expression within the United Reformed Church) • the significance of context and culture in the shaping of faith • the importance of being a theologian for particular times and places 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interpretation, listening and critique • analysis and discernment • interpreting and renewing the traditions of faith from within particular contexts
A worshipper and worship leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • as one who has strong habits of worship and prayer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • patterns of worship and where they come from 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • leading worship of deep quality

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the demands of shaping worship in contemporary cultures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> deepening faith and worship for others
A pastor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> with a depth of self-awareness with openness to, and a desire to life for, others attentive to the safety of all with sensitivity and responsiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ministry as accompaniment patterns of human relationship patterns of human community and society the human psyche 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> listening and counselling understanding and interpreting people and situations
An educator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> as one committed to being a learner throughout life with awareness of own learning style and needs taking regular opportunities to learn, develop and grow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> how people learn and grow the place of learning in faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> teaching all ages and all kinds of people
A missionary and evangelist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> as one on fire with the Gospel with a message to proclaim with a love for God's world with a commitment to community and others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> how to analyse and to understand the contemporary world and particular contexts the demands of evangelism today how societies are made how truth is established and challenged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> effective communication social and political action inspiring and enabling others in mission and evangelism

A collaborator and community builder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • always seeking the good of the whole • as one committed to the church s/he serves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the particular gifts s/he can bring • group dynamics • how community is made and how communities work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • animating the gifts of others • community and team building • models of decision making • leadership and management • administration • working with others
A public figure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • with a commitment to contributing to the world • in the service of wider society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social and political worlds • how to support and how to critique society • how power works • human life at the centre and at the margins 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engaging with public bodies • taking part in the life of the wider world
A communicator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a life open to others and interested in them • with a passion for deep encounter with others • with creativity and imagination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interpersonal communication • oral and written communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preaching and speaking • presentation of text, image and sound • information technology

Also included in the resolution was a similar grid relation to Church Related Community ministry²³, which had already been accepted as authoritative. The Record of Assembly 2016 reports that 'After extensive discussion, the resolution was passed recognising disagreement'. However, investigation of the Mission Council papers and reports in succeeding years suggests that such work has been superseded or downgraded in importance by other concerns, as there is no further reference to it.

Clearly all these lists of desirable qualities propose the 'perfect' Minister, gifted in a wide range of areas. Equally clearly, most Ministers will have strengths and weaknesses, as well as personal preferences, making the fitting of Ministers to posts something of an art and a definite discernment process.

Alan Sell prefers to use the term 'minister of the gospel' (Sell 2014, p9) and though he allows that the ministry of the Church is not confined to the ordained, his focus is on them. He sees their first and most important task as the leading of worship:

The first task – or, rather, the high, unmerited, privilege – of the minister of the gospel is to lead the saints to the throne of grace. For much of our history this would have been taken for granted, but I emphasise it now, because from their characteristic attitudes and actions, one could be forgiven for suspecting that some churches and some ministers think that the church exist primarily to be a social service, or an agent for social and political change, or an hospitable place where the needy may find friendship and a cup of tea. (Sell 2014, p26)

²³ This can be found in the *General Assembly Book of Reports 2016*, p81-2 https://urc.org.uk/images/General-Assemblies/Assembly2016/assembly_reports_16.pdf Church Related Community Worker (CRCW) is a role in the United Reformed Church with parity of assessment and training with Ministers of Word & Sacrament and who is considered a colleague, that is not managed by the Minister.

He concedes that this is all good work but stresses that it should find its inspiration in the worship of the church. Though Sell seems to imply that all have gifts for ministry and cites the church meeting as evidence that the United Reformed Church has provided for its exercise (Sell 2014, p8), he reserves the term 'minister' for those ordained and called to particular service and it remains unclear what roles others in the church are to play. However, Ministers of Word and Sacrament are not the only ministry practitioners in the church. There are also, as already referred to, Church Related Community Workers (CRCW), evangelism enablers, mission enablers, elders, lay preachers, youth and family workers, local lay leaders. CRCWs are assessed and trained alongside ministers of Word & Sacrament, but are commissioned, rather than ordained, and for set terms. Evangelism and mission enablers may be ordained Ministers, but not necessarily so, and will normally be commissioned for a set term. Elders are ordained, this being for life, but their service is often termed and an ordained elder moving to a new church will not serve unless elected by the local congregation. Lay preachers can be locally recognised or accredited by General Assembly depending on their level of training. Youth and family workers will normally be lay members with specific training and experience and commissioned for a term in a specific place. 'Local lay leaders' is a term that means different things in different parts of the United Reformed Church as each Synod finds its own way of providing leadership to the churches in its area. Levels of training, commissioning, areas of responsibility and authority therefore vary from place to place, as has already been noted²⁴. Elsewhere, in the Appendix, is a guide to the selection, training and authorising of these different ministries. This sense of ministry being connected to the corporate life of the church is very important to Sell, who writes about those Ministers who work outside the normal church settings in chaplaincies and colleges, social work and church administrative posts. Using his own experience as example, he

²⁴ see Footnote 1 in this chapter

explains that he had always spoken to his Moderator when considering such a post:

I was not required to do this, but I felt that I am a minister not for my sake but for the sake of Christ and his church, and it mattered to the church how I was exercising my calling. (Sell 2014, p17-18)

Sell's emphasis on the connectedness of church, whether as priesthood of all believers or making vocation more than just an individual's business is also behind his desire for the revitalisation of the church meeting (Peel 2019, p 188ff) and is a subject that will be returned to in due course.²⁵

3.6 Concerns and issues

The concerns of the Church regarding its ministry can be initially explored through a series of reports that have been presented to General Assembly. The two principal reports are *Patterns of Ministry 1994* and *Equipping the Saints 2004*. This latter report was followed up with *Challenge to the Church 2008* and in the past ten years different aspects of the church's ministry have been debated. The following tables list Mission Council²⁶ debates for the past five years and General Assembly²⁷ debates for the past ten years.²⁸

²⁵ See chapter 5

²⁶ Mission Council currently (2018) meets twice a year to manage the business of the Church between General Assemblies.

²⁷ General Assembly currently (2018) meets every other year. From 2020, the pattern will revert to annual Assemblies with one Mission Council meeting a year.

²⁸ YEAR: Mission Council currently (2019) meets twice a year with an occasional extra meeting in the years that General Assembly, which is biennial at the moment, does not meet.

REPORT REF: All papers and reports are available online - <https://urc.org.uk/clergy-and-office-holders/assembly-council-and-committees.html>

SUBJECT: self-explanatory

STATUS: the result of any vote that might have been taken on resolutions. The URC mostly uses consensus decision-making, which allows for disagreement to be recognised and recorded

Mission Council - last 5 years:

YEAR	MONTH	REPORT REF.	SUBJECT	STATUS
2012	March		Faith & Order reference group	Agreed
		N	Resourcing ministry	Passed to General Assembly
	October	M	Special category ministers	Agreed
2013	May	A/A1flipcharts	Future of the church	
	November	F1	Future of the church	
2014	March	S2	Role of Synod Moderator	Agreed
		F1	Ordained local ministry	Agreed
	November	X1	NSM age limit	Referred to Ministries
2015	November	F1	Authorised elders	Sent back to F&O
		F2	Faith & order	
2016	October	H1	Deployment	Agreed
		H2	Call	
2017	May	H1	Call	Agreed
		H2	Deployment	Agreed
		H3	Includes – authorised elders	Voted en bloc
		X2	West Mids – numbers of SMs	Not passed
		Z1	Where is God calling URC – moderators	
	November	H1	NSM model 4	Agreed

2018	March	H2	Guidelines on conduct of authorised elders	Agreed
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General Assembly - last 10 years

YEAR	REPORT REF	SUBJECT	STATUS
2008	p227	Challenge to the church	Revised & carried by consensus
2010	p140	Challenge to the church update	
	p248	Ministerial working week	Agreed
	p215 & 251	Guidelines on conduct for ministers, CRCWs, elders	Agreed
2012	p47	Role of Synod moderators	Withdrawn
	p106	Report	
	p193	Resourcing ministry	Passed by consensus
	p252	Trends in minister numbers	Passed by consensus
	p259	Resourcing ministries	Remaindered – Clause <i>a</i> passed by consensus, rest referred back to Ministries, then MC
	p267	Wessex res – locally ordained ministers	Referred to MC
2014	p102	Faith & Order report	Passed by consensus
	p78	West Midlands res – extending age of NSM	Deferred to Mission Council

2016	p78	21 st century expectations for ministry	Passed recognising disagreement
	p92	Authorised elders	Referred to MC
	p154	Deployment	Passed by consensus
	p162	Assessment procedure	Passed en bloc
2018	p135	Flexible approach to call	Passed recognising disagreement
	p137	Model 4 NSM	Withdrawn

The *Patterns of Ministry* Working Party was set up in 1992, twenty years after the original foundation of the URC. Its remit was:

to bring proposals that are theologically sound, relevant to the life of the church today, appropriate to its mission and, as far as possible, acceptable ecumenically. (*Patterns of Ministry Interim report* para. 3.1 1994, p6)

Two key drivers are laid out in the first section: firstly the URC response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1985 and then the recorded decline in both church membership - from 192,000 in 1973 to 111,000 in 1993 - and ordained stipendiary ministers - from 1,163 in 1974 to 772 in 1993. In addition, the Working Party was particularly asked to reaffirm the ministry of the whole people of God, consider a proposal for a Presiding Elder, review the number of entrants to Stipendiary Ministry, at the same time taking note of General Assembly's appreciation of Non-Stipendiary Ministers and Lay Preachers.²⁹

The Working Party followed a pattern that was to become familiar – consultation with committees, Ministers and elders and ecumenical partners, followed by an interim report presented to General Assembly then remitted to the Councils of the Church and local churches for

²⁹ Capitalisation is taken from the original report.

endorsement, with a final report with any resolutions presented to a following General Assembly. It asked questions that would also become familiar about the relationship between Stipendiary and Non-Stipendiary Ministers, the growing number of Ministers working in the community and the development of Church Related Community Work ministry, the roles and status of lay preachers and elders, the need for local leaders and team ministries, and the necessity of a strategy for the deployment of Stipendiary Ministers across the Church. These concerns are underlined by Appendix D – Selected Statistics, which chronicles the decline in number of members and Ministers and the rise in Church Related Community Workers.

Some recommendations were never followed up. The recognition of diaconal ministries, brought together into a special association or network, which would include CRCWs, Special Category Ministers, ministers working in the community, chaplains, is an idea that has only been honoured in a fragmented way, through a range of different networks. An early retirement package for Stipendiary Ministers who have lost their sense of call and feel trapped by the financial implications of resigning³⁰, was perhaps too radical a proposal for the times, ordination being considered for life, but has not been suggested since.

Some recommendations have been taken up. There has been a serious attempt to remove the distinctions between Stipendiary and Non-Stipendiary Ministers by offering a common training package, as far as is practically possible, together with similar terms of settlement, training opportunities, etc. Those who had continued as 'local pastors', predominantly from the Churches of Christ, did become Non-Stipendiary Ministers in pastoral charge. Deployment is a subject returned to again and again, with different formulae suggested, but the pattern of allocating

³⁰ A Minister who was ordained before 2008, when new rules regarding Ministers' Retired Housing eligibility were introduced, may have sold a house or never owned one. Leaving ministry would then necessitate the purchase of housing at an age when a mortgage might not be possible. The fear of homelessness can then be a very real concern.

a number of ministers to each Synod – still called Provinces in 1994 – remains.

Recommendations that continued to be made time after time were those around the needs of the local churches for local leadership, local presidency at the sacraments, lay preachers and good team working. Ten years later, another interim report *Equipping the Saints: Changing Ministry for the Challenge of Mission* followed the same pattern – a working party, entitled ‘Future Patterns of Ministry’ set up by a General Assembly, who consulted, produced an interim report for wider consultation, followed by a final report to General Assembly. As before it is the interim report from 2004 that is the most widely available.

This report did not focus on falling roles as *Patterns of Ministry* had. By this time all denominations had become accustomed to the shrinkage. What *Equipping the Saints* was focussed on was a movement ‘from maintenance to mission’ as the mantra became, graphically illustrated in the report to General Assembly that year. (United Reformed Church 2004, p124) There had been discussion in the earlier report on encouraging a more outward-looking approach, but this is foregrounded in 2004:

- 1.1 A fast changing society provides a challenging context (section 2) for the Church. In our interim report to the 2002 Assembly, we suggested that the Church’s response would need to recapture a sense of the ministry of the whole people of God (section 4), and our post-bag has supported this view. One way of viewing this key concept is to think of making people more active members of the Church focused outwards into the world – from disciples to apostles (section 3). We challenge every local church to think afresh about its support of its members when they are dispersed in their daily living (sub-section 4.4). (*Equipping the Saints* 2004, p1)

The report lists developments since *Patterns of Ministry*: a single order of Ministers of Word and Sacrament had been established; some Synods had begun to experiment with the concept of Local Church Leaders; there had been some work on the grouping of churches and the recruitment and

deployment of ministers were identified as continuing concerns; there had been no change regarding lay presidency at the sacraments; finally, finance, not addressed in the earlier report, is brought into focus. Each of the different 'set apart' ministries is discussed in turn – elders, Local Church Leaders, accredited lay preachers, Church Related Community Workers, Ministers of Word and Sacraments – with recommendations for each, followed by further recommendations regarding collaborative and complementary leadership, the classification, training and remuneration of Ministers and other ministries, finance and presidency at the Sacraments. Consultation with ecumenical partners, naming the Methodist Church in particular, are recommended.

An issue addressed here, not considered in earlier reports, is that of language:

It is clearly important to be as precise as possible with the language that we use. It is also necessary to acknowledge the wide variety of interpretations of many words that are in common use among us including 'minister', 'ministry', 'ministries', 'vocation' and 'discipleship' and that words can have different meanings in different contexts. (*Equipping the Saints* 2004, p4 para 2.6.1)

The concept of 'the ministry of the whole people of God' sits uneasily alongside the use of 'minister' as a quasi job title. The Methodist Church has officially adopted the term 'presbyter' to avoid this confusion³¹, though the term 'minister' is still most commonly used in the local church.

Equipping the Saints further recommends new ways of classifying those it continues to call Ministers:

Recommendation 8: The Church should develop a new way of classifying its Ministers according to the service being offered that can supersede the existing stipendiary 'Patterns' and non-stipendiary 'Models'. (*Equipping the Saints* 2004, p11)

³¹ A report to the 2002 Methodist Conference (<https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-what-is-a-presbyter-2002.pdf> accessed 13th February 2020) uses both 'presbyter' and 'minister', suggesting that the former is technical language used to differentiate different forms of ministry.

This report came at a significant time in the life of the United Reformed Church as it began to review its whole life³², ministry and mission under the heading *Catch the Vision*. Accordingly, the proposals that were presented to the 2006 General Assembly were subsumed under that banner, as part of a drive for church renewal.

In succeeding years, deployment continued to be a cause for concern. The formula of tracking the fall in the number of Ministers against the fall in the membership roll was made possible by means of regulating the number of Ministers of other denominations being given licence to serve the URC. A very real challenge came, and continues to come, from the fact that churches do not close at the same rate, meaning that if one Minister might be assumed to serve a membership of, say 150, then that might now mean up to, and beyond, ten congregations. In 2008 a new report from the Ministries Committee, entitled *Challenge to the Church* (United Reformed Church 2008, p225) , sought to offer some way forward to continue to honour the Church's commitment to provide ministry to each congregation, whilst being realistic about the available resources available – both financial and personnel. The resolution to General Assembly that year was worded as follows:

General Assembly:

- i) believes that each congregation and mission group has a need of its own local leader to work in partnership with the elders' meeting to challenge, enable and equip the saints and be a focus of Christian presence in the local community; and
- ii) affirms the value of team pastorates in providing pastoral support, encouragement and training for those in local leadership;
- iii) therefore requests synods
 - a) to identify and quantify the leadership needs of each local situation,

³² Sparked by a speech at Mission Council in 2003 by the then General Secretary, Rev Dr David Cornick, which addressed the decline in membership and a review of church life that suggested that Bible study and prayer were less of a priority to local congregations than social action, 'Catch the Vision' included the reorganisation that removed District Councils, a three year programme of prayer, Bible study and evangelism called 'Vision4Life' and the mission programme 'Vision 2020', which is discussed in chapter 6.

- b) make arrangements for the recruitment, training, calling and support of local leaders, and
- c) to encourage the development of team pastorates to provide pastoral support, encouragement and training.

In debate, ecumenical possibilities for team-building and for training lay members was called for. There was also some resistance, stating that synods have been trying to do this but not always able to identify local leadership and pointing out that the proposed timescale was unrealistic. More critically there were claims that creative ministry was being hindered by lack of accreditation and financial support and there was a call for more theological reflection on the difference between leadership and ministry. Following some rewriting a revised resolution was passed by consensus. The revision added an ecumenical dimension, recognising that ecumenical teams and cross-denominational pastorates might be the best way forward in some situations.

3.7 Statistics

Might it be possible to clarify the current situation by looking at the relevant figures? Numbers can tell their own story and are often thought of as more absolute than words.

When issues of deployment are raised in General Assembly, reports generally rely on the presentation of sets of figures to make their case. The most recent discussion on deployment of ministers was in 2016, when a new formula for the allocation of ministers was proposed. Prior to this, membership, the number of churches and population was considered, using a weighting ratio of 3:2:1. It was acknowledged that outdated (1991) figures of population were being used and that, given economic developments since that time, newer figures would result in wealthier areas being favoured. However, since this represented only one-sixth of the weighting, it was proposed to discontinue that factor in the calculation. The resulting table presented show the effects of this proposal:

SYNOD ³³	1 Nth	2 NW	3 Mer	4 Yor	5 EM	6 WM	7 East	8 SW	9 Wess	10 TN	11 Sth	12 Wal	13 Sco	Totals
MEMBERS- 2015	2693	5545	3288	3269	3636	4825	4580	3389	5849	5221	7038	2109	2856	54298
CHURCHES -2015	71	131	82	99	132	121	135	115	134	133	149	98	47	1447
POPULATION 1991 (in thousands)	3051	3931	2733	4494	4702	5632	3266	3204	4271	5904	5818	2808	5000	54814
Ministers – actual end of year figures 2015	21	41	20	25	31	34	41	28	39	32	49	15	20	393
FTE target, end of year New formula: M=60, C=40, P=0	19	37	23	24	29	33	34	27	39	36	46	19	17	383

³³ Northern, North Western, Mersey, Yorkshire, East Midlands, West Midlands, Eastern, South Western, Wessex, Thames North, Southern, Wales, Scotland

FTE target, end of year Old formula: M=50,C=33,P=17	19	36	22	26	30	34	32	26	37	37	45	19	20	383
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(General Assembly Book of Reports)

It was acknowledged that Yorkshire Synod and the National Synod of Scotland came out worst under the new formula, but help would be available to them to adjust. There was a further table projecting minister numbers up to the year 2025, when the target number would be 266, but the predicted number only 235. The shortfall would be met by issuing certificates of eligibility to ministers outside of the United Reformed Church.

An example of the effect of these figures on local churches can be seen in the document *Maximising Ministry for Mission*. This was drawn up and circulated to all churches in the North Wales Region for consultation. It takes the figures predicted for the National Synod of Wales in 2024 and presents the Synod's own internal formula:

Region	Members	Adherents	Churches	Ministers	Members	Churches	Ministers
A North Wales	378	130	13	2	20%	14%	14%
B East Wales	190	109	15	2	10%	16%	14%
C South Wales*	570	240	19	4	30%	21%	29%
D Swansea	185	77	7	1	10%	8%	7%
E Pembrokeshire	191	66	13	2	10%	14%	14%
F Mid Wales	134	47	12	0	7%	13%	0%
G Bridgend	132	34	4	1	7%	4%	7%
H Usk-Wye	150	31	9	2	8%	10%	14%
Totals	1930	734	92	14	100%	100%	100%

*2 in Cardiff, 1 in RCT, 1 in Caerphilly and Merthyr

When the report was written in 2019, the thirteen North Wales churches were served by 5 full-time ministers, with one church being served by a retired minister on a renewable 3-year termed contract. This gives some idea of the implications of such a reduction in Ministers in the region, effectively reducing the number to a third of current practice.

Another source of figures is the table produced annually by Martin Camroux, a retired URC Minister. He details the decline in church membership:

YEAR	1972	1996	2006	2016
MEMBERSHIP	192,136	100,192	76,013	52,060

This represents a total decline of 72.9%. In fact, the decline is slightly worse, since the URC was joined by the 2317 members of the Churches of Christ in 1981 and 4151 members of the Congregational Church in Scotland in 2000.

Camroux also chronicles the decrease in church sizes and active ministers:

YEAR	1973	2016
CHURCH BUILDINGS	2080	1426
AVERAGE CHURCH SIZE	92	36
ACTIVE MINISTERS	1844	438

(Camroux 2018)

The implications of this table are clear. At its inception the URC had almost one minister per church, whereas now that ratio is closer to one minister per twelve churches.

Inevitably, when figures are presented in this way the tendency is to continue the projection, which has been downward, and come to rather depressing conclusions.

The organisation *Christian Research* has been watching membership and attendance figures since 1997 and its most recent report comes to the conclusion that church attendance, as a whole, may be reaching the end of its decline. Admittedly it lists the URC as still falling in membership and attendance, but other denominations are either stabilising, and in some cases, growing. (<https://www.christian-research.org/reports/archives-and-statistics/uk-church-overview/> accessed 17.05.2019)

Numbers may be absolute, but their interpretation is most definitely nuanced and looking at figures relating to the life of the church in isolation from other statistics can lead to false conclusions. What we choose to count is also significant. Membership figures can be manipulated – upwards to increase the likelihood of a Minister being available, or downwards to reduce the required payment to central funds – and many churches are reluctant to withdraw membership from non-attenders.

Average attendance at worship will vary weekly and seasonally as family and work life dictates.

The United Reformed Church may be declining into extinction, if the fall in numbers continues as it has thus far. Alternatively, if we see ourselves as part of the bigger picture and perhaps come into line with other denominations and begin to settle, then the concept of a faithful remnant with the potential for growth could be a more positive self-image.

3.8 Emerging themes

The debate in 2008 epitomised the themes that have emerged over the lifetime of the United Reformed Church and continue to dominate discussion, as well as illustrating the different theological voices that are heard in the different councils of the church – at General Assembly and Mission Council, in meetings of Synods and in the local church. Across the whole Church there are questions about deployment arising from changing society and falling membership rolls. Proposals to delegate leadership to lay members reveals a lingering clericalism, not helped by our language of ministry and ministers.

Ecumenism remains an important aspect of the URC's self-understanding, notwithstanding the very real disappointment and disillusion of the first uniters. Finally, but not insignificantly there was the question of where authority sits in the United Reformed Church.

Potential answers to such questions are presented at almost regular intervals to General Assembly, but then ecclesial polity comes into play. The United Reformed Church is still young and there are still many who were members of the founding denomination and still some who hanker after their old traditions. Whatever the *formal* and *espoused* voices say out loud and however it would seem that they are also set to become *normative*, the *operant* voice calls from the local congregation and hangs on the words 'normally' and 'strongly urge' to go their own way. The congregational ethos retains a strong influence and local church meetings have an authority that is not available in some other denominations.

General Assembly resolutions rarely compel, only recommend. The result is that there may be one denomination, but it is made up of thirteen almost autonomous Synods, resulting in thirteen different interpretations of Assembly resolutions. The Presbyterian aspects of the URC are best demonstrated in the way the Mission and Ministry Fund aids the fairer distribution of stipendiary ministry, but the Congregational aspects of independence, also present in the Churches of Christ, holds sway on everything from the prevailing theology of a local church to its participation in any given denominational programme.

The use of statistics to review the distribution, or deployment, of Ministers in a situation of falling membership and churches closing, but not as quickly, can be a way of manipulating the argument. However, looked at without taking into account the context, whether ecumenical, sociological or economic, they can only offer a partial insight into the current situation and therefore have only partial influence over any potential solution or way forward.

Both *Patterns of Ministry* and *Equipping the Saints* shone lights on knotty problems that refuse to go away. The question of lay presidency at the sacraments was discussed in 2016, some twenty years since it appeared in *Patterns of Ministry*, to be repeated ten years later in *Equipping the Saints*. Recognition of the range of ministries – ordained and lay – and the creation of collaborative teams still needs to find a way forward that will allow local congregations to feel both that they have good leadership and that their gifts are acknowledged and valued. The importance of an outward focus for the Church, its part in God's mission to the world, still seems to take second place to the need to find the best way of serving that mission. A lot of serious thought and hard work has gone on in Working Parties and Assembly Committees and has only partly been built on. The theology that is *espoused* in resolutions and statements is often drowned out by the *operant* theology lived out in the local church, though both are vocal in maintaining that they are true to the traditions, the *normative* theological voice.

Finding a way to halt this potentially vicious circle, allowing the Church to move on, is emerging as an aim of this particular study and a new ecclesial methodology is necessary if it is not to end up down the same cul-de-sac.

3.9 Summary

Ministry in the United Reformed Church has its own history of almost 50 years but is influenced by the 500 years since the Lutheran Reformation and even beyond. Reviewing the voices, *formal* and *normative*, that have brought us to this point goes some way to explaining the condition of contemporary ministry.

Further reading of reports and debates on ministry at General Assembly and Mission Council adds detail of *espoused* positions. Other written sources, such as articles in *Reform* magazine, begin to include the *operant* voice.

The issues arising from these sources have already been detailed –

- deployment
- clericalism
- ecumenism
- the role of ministry
- models of ministry practice

The following chapter will turn to ministry as it is practised. Firstly, the ethnographic study of ministry in the South Western Synod of the URC will be written up, coded and analysed. Then Contextual Bible Study groups in the National Synod of Wales will discuss particular texts chosen by the first group of ministers. Finally the results of both exercises will be compared to draw out a composite picture of ministry as it is both practised and reflected on today.

4. Ministry in practice

In accordance with the methodology laid out in the previous chapter, the second stage – Discover – continues with the voices of practising ministers. Chapter Two focussed mainly on the *formal* and *normative* voices to be found in written sources, whether they be books of theology or church history, reports to the councils of the United Reformed Church or statistics. Some of these reports, and particularly items from *Reform* magazine could be classed as *espoused* voices, but in this chapter I aim to add to those and also bring in the *operant* voice, by asking ministers to talk about and reflect on their actual practice.

Two methodological tools will be the main sources. Firstly Appreciative Inquiry paired conversations with ministers practising in the South Western Synod were recorded and transcribed. These conversations have been explored to open up the joys and successes, as well as the concerns and frustrations of ministers – lay and ordained - in a variety of settings. The resulting picture of ministry has been tested out against the views of a different group of ministers from the same Synod, as well as correspondence with training and development officers in other Synods, who were asked how alike would be the results of a similar exercise in their own Synod.

Secondly, mindful of the need for scripture to enter into the conversation, Contextual Bible Study groups were set up in North Wales with Ministers of Word and Sacrament and also with elders. The context being their

experience and practice of ministry, a selection of Biblical texts, chosen by the ministers interviewed in the South Western Synod, were studied collectively to draw out insights for contemporary ministers.

In a third part of this chapter, the results of the two exercises – paired conversations and Contextual Bible Study - to find similarities and differences and attempt to produce a coherent picture of ministry as it is practised. These conclusions will go forward into critical dialogue with the conclusions drawn from the written texts in Chapter Two, on the way to constructing a practical theology of ministry for the contemporary context in the URC.

4A Listening to ministers

4A.1 Ministry in the South Western Synod

The chapter on Methodology laid out in some detail the field-work study used to draw up a picture of ministry in the South Western Synod of the United Reformed Church. At the end of this process, a collection of interviews, transcribed verbatim as far as possible, was assembled to be analysed. Initial coding was carried out using the NVivo software³⁴. This, for a participant researcher, has the advantage of being less partial and therefore less inclined to miss things that might otherwise be taken for granted.

After this broad-brush approach, a more detailed reading, following up the clues highlighted by NVivo, elicited some clear common threads. Two of the main principles of Appreciative Inquiry are the building on strengths and creating a sense of generativity. This latter is important for this research, as the whole exercise was prompted by a felt need for change. Generativity is that sense of movement, a direction of travel, that prevents a study from being merely a statement of the status quo. The emphasis on strength-based research, a principle feature of Appreciative Inquiry, also gives a good foundation to any changes. Rather than carry out a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, Appreciative

³⁴ NVivo is a software programme that supports and enables the analysis of qualitative research, facilitating the coding of data and providing formats for the easy access of quotations and references.

Inquiry offers a SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, resources) analysis. This was the structure I used to analyse the conversations. There were, as previously stated, four questions used as conversation starters:

- What do you see as effective ministry where you are?
- What might be different/ what opportunities are being missed?
- How might change be effected?
- What Biblical or other spiritual resources inspire your ministry?

The first three questions relate to Strengths (1), Opportunities (2) and Resources (3). The fourth question will be explored at a later stage. Aspirations were provided by an exercise carried out at a Ministers' Day.

One initial comment is worth making. I had wondered how my interviewees would define 'ministry'. We can be very constrained by vocabulary. Would they link the word with 'minister', which is the usual term used by the URC for its trained church leaders, presbyters in current Methodist terminology? Would ordained or lay people devalue the ministry carried out by church elders and members? In the letter inviting them to take part, I was clear that it was the whole ministry of the people of God that was the subject of my inquiry, but face-to-face and in conversation, that might not have influenced their thinking.

However, I found that from the start, all my interviewees saw the broader picture of ministry. Some had clearly given a lot of thought to the outline questions I had given them, but most had simply agreed and were talking openly and 'off the cuff'. The resulting picture was therefore, though threaded through with frustrations and disappointments and even despair, ultimately positive and hopeful.

On several occasions expressions of frustration and disappointment were accompanied by tentative attempts to resolve or improve situations. Sometimes this was expressed as a critique of URC policy or as a desire to bring some activity or other to a dignified end. There was in these conversations a very real sense of hope, of the possibility of change.

When set against the fast-declining membership of the church³⁵, this prompts a question. Is the United Reformed Church on the route to extinction, or is the remaining membership a resilient, faithful remnant with the capacity and strength to resist the trend? This is a question I will return to in due course.

4A.2 Coding the data

The actual coding of the data, by which is meant the transcripts of the interviews, happened in distinct phases. Firstly, each script was read

³⁵ Retired United Reformed Church minister Revd Martin Camroux analyses the membership statistics on an annual basis, his latest analysis indicates a decline of 15% since 2006.

through fairly soon after the interview and those phrases that seemed significant and/or related to a large part of the conversation, or simply leapt off the page were highlighted. As time went on, there was occasionally the need to go back to a script to highlight an issue that had arisen in one or more other conversations. These points were manually assigned to a particular code – e.g. worship, pastoral care, rigidity.

Then the highlighted scripts were uploaded to nVivo and the codes, named ‘nodes’ in nVivo, were refined. Using the various search facilities, it was possible to check for common words, and then themes, that had been missed before. Then, by counting up the times certain nodes appeared in the conversations as a whole, a hierarchy of comment was drawn up, so that what appears in the chart below are those themes and nodes that were significant across the whole range of conversations.

The third stage was to group these significant codes, or nodes, into categories, which became themes.

The following table introduces the themes, using Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations and Resources/Results as the main themes and the subheadings that emerged from analysis of that section of the conversations. Individual items and key words appear in the third column, with nVivo nodes in the fourth.

<p>Opportunities (for change)</p>	<p>rigidity in church life</p> <p>new approaches to ministry needed</p> <p>sense of depression</p>	<p>rule-bound <i>nostalgia</i> not enough creativity in approach to ministry</p> <p>caught between old and new models</p> <p>lack of active members <i>minister shared between churches</i></p>	<p>bureaucracy <i>old-fashioned Sunday School</i> rigidity <i>worship</i> not reaching out <i>insularity</i> alienated from culture <i>new estates</i></p> <p>creative approach to ministry <i>people</i> real team work <i>youth work</i> resources <i>consistent theology</i></p> <p>dying churches <i>loss of confidence</i> low expectations <i>time</i> spread of ministers</p>

Aspirations ³⁶	<p>team ministry <i>developing disciples</i> clear Christian identity <i>transformed relationships</i> people – and world – centred <i>fulfilling potential</i> more creative celebratory</p>		
Resources	<p>change in structures</p> <p>better relationships</p> <p>spiritual growth</p>	<p>new forms of ministry <i>local church leadership</i> hospice care for churches</p> <p>within URC <i>with community</i> ecumenically</p>	<p>challenge structures <i>palliative care for churches</i> rethink deployment <i>train differently</i> enable people <i>good support structures</i> better relationships <i>communication</i> connect with community</p> <p>spirituality</p>

³⁶ This section of the SOAR chart comes not from answers to a question put to interviewees, but from an exercise carried out at a South Western Synod ministers' day in June 2016. Ministers were invited to write on one side of a piece of card the situation they wished to escape from and on the other their hopes for a renewed situation.

4A.3 Strengths

What do you see as effective ministry where you are?

No further definition was given for the term 'effective ministry', leaving the minister to respond in his/her own way, using their own definitions, both of what constituted ministry and what 'effective' might mean. In the event there was a certain amount of agreement. Four main themes emerged – growing faith, community building, outreach and pastoral care. Trailing not far behind were stewardship and generosity.

4A.3.1 Growing faith

Grouped together as 'growing faith', worship and teaching were most often cited as being effective ministry. Sunday morning for many, if not most church members, is the one time they actively engage with others who share their faith. It has become for many ministers the best time to offer any teaching, but there is a recognition that worship is, has to be, more than just teaching.

meaningful worship . . . that people can engage with and perhaps get excited about and go and talk to friends about (GO1,p3)

Along with regular worship, some also specifically referred to the sacraments – naturally enough these were ministers of Word & Sacrament.

effective ministry for me in the context of me as a minister of word and sacrament is about empowering and enabling people to enter into relationship with God in the context of word and sacrament so corporate worship and their own spiritual journey and discipleship (SM1,p2)

And in hospital too, it was also seen to be something that could be offered on a one-to-one basis –

we also shared community (sic) together because that person's spirituality he asked if he could receive communion and the answer is kind of 'give me ten minutes (laughter) we can do this' um but to be able to again in the context of a ward which isn't always that peaceful to create the sacred space in which someone felt strengthened by receiving the sacrament that's effective ministry (HC1,p3)

4A.3.2 Community building: outreach and pastoral care

Food was mentioned on a number of occasions when outreach and mission was talked about – barbecues, cream teas, community lunches, coffee mornings, a church-run café called St Arbucks.

the notion of table hospitality incidental kindnesses welcoming the outsider (NSM3,p5)

Eating together appeared important both for engaging with the wider community and for building up relationships within the congregation. One story linked the teaching aspect with this –

after I left (. . .) I still met with some friends after I left as a Bible study thing and we wanted to learn together there was only about 8 of us and we started and used to meet about 2 o'clock in the afternoon and it was going OK but there was just this sort of edge to it and then one day someone said 'could we meet a bit earlier' and we said 'oh but that would be lunch time well we'll have a meal together OK then and then as soon as we sat round a table together it opened up and then people were it wasn't that we were dishonest before but we there was this sense of holding back but there was a discerning moment when we sat round a table and we ate together and the conversation opened up and I think it does . . . that barriers are broken when bread is broken (LP1, p12)

Another minister linked worship and food together in a community-building that resourced the mission of the church –

there's a Saturday social sort of coffee time which is important and in amongst all the other meetings and committees of church I think the the friendship and

the worship and the prayer are the support that members and friends in the church draw on when they're going about their daily life (SM5,p10)

But just as important was responding to the context in which ministry was being offered, whether that was in a church or hospital, rural or urban setting. Mission needed to be appropriate and there was recognition that there could be no set pattern. This was particularly so when pastoral care and mission were linked. For example, a hospital chaplain commented –

what I want for someone towards the end of their life is to be at peace with themselves at peace with those around them and at peace with God so if you like effective ministry is quite simple to define it would be to achieve all three of those things in some way or to contribute to achieving them (HC1,p2)

Another retired minister saw the church as adding to what might already be happening –

the ministry I see as being effective is people being looked after and cared for in ways that the local community isn't already doing or might not be doing it uh the lady across the street has some of the members of the church still go to visit her though she's not been to church in 20 years probably . . . and she's very much seen as part of the church even though most of the younger people newer people who've joined the church have no idea who she is (RM1,p2)

Time and again though, people talked about the ministry of 'presence' eloquently described by a new ordinand:

I think it's when we're not expecting to meet people on our terms and I think that's quite key for people who feel vulnerable um a bit disillusioned it's that thing of being in their space and their time and just listening to them (GO1,p4)

Another contributor put it this way:

loitering with intent (laughs) yea or sometimes just sit down and have coffee because that's when people will come up and say 'oh you're not busy for a minute then' (LM3,p3)

Put simply 'presence' is just being there and available and willing to talk.

This might be in a pub, at the Air Training Corps, coffee mornings and community meals (food again!), in the local café, offering chaplaincy to different organisations, but wherever it was there was no suggestion of directing the conversation but of following where others wanted to go.

One speaker gave a concrete example, reflecting on a colleague's practice:

[. .] is actually doing it very well he goes into pubs and he sits down and has a cup of coffee maybe or I know he was in the [.] Hotel recently inviting people to come along and join him in a cup of coffee and some croissants in the morning er just being church in community just to be there with people (RM1,p3)

4A.3.3 Stewardship and generosity

The generosity of churches was a minor theme, but worth mention as I suspect that similar comments might be made about other churches.

we are used to raising money. The money for the new roof was pledged at one church meeting . . . there is also always a good response to appeals – whether that is for 'things' FoodBank, Open Door, Women's Aid, or money for Water Aid, communion collections, special appeals (LM4,p1)

The same person also talked about stewardship – not just the good maintenance of buildings, but also the willingness to spend money on projects, such as employing a community worker. In a similar vein, a minister working in a chaplaincy setting -

back to effectiveness I mean another thing which surprised me is administry in my role . . . I work with (3 different groups named) I have an office I have a budget for paper a good computer and that is a really valuable a certain degree of computer you know processing fluency in just enabling conversations between all those three in in you know supplying several copies of agendas for meetings it might seem very boring but there doesn't seem to be anybody else (GM1,p4)

How then might 'effective ministry' be defined? What are the strengths of the church as she is now? A picture emerges from these conversations of a church that, at its best, builds on good worship and teaching, enabling the congregation to live out its faith in an informed way; a church that creates community within its membership, that eats together, works together and goes beyond its boundaries to eat and work with others, whether people of faith or not; a church that gets to know its context and community and responds in appropriate ways; a church that listens, that cares in practical and spiritual ways; a church that is generous and uses its resources well, not keeping them to itself. 'Ministry' might then be reasonably defined as all that enables the mission of the church, if that mission is to communicate the Gospel and roll out the Kingdom of God.

Significantly, evangelism was mentioned only once, nor was 'effective' seen to equal 'making new members'. The falling membership of the United Reformed Church has already been referred to and the church is no more or less liable to equate numbers with success than any other section of the church or society as a whole. The appeal of large evangelical churches, whether out of the Holy Trinity Brompton³⁷ stable or one of the new breed of independent churches, is often a topic of conversation when church people get together, with the prevailing question being 'what are they doing to attract so many numbers'.

³⁷ Holy Trinity Church, Brompton, or HTB is an Anglican church, where the popular evangelical Alpha course was developed. The church has spread now to four sites in London, all called HTB. There are a number of church plants, again developed by HTB, around the country.

However these conversations did not reflect that approach in any way.

There was clearly a desire to spread the Gospel, but the aim seemed rather to 'extend the Kingdom' or make the world a better place than to get 'bums on pews', as newcomers to a church are sometimes irreverently called or increase the roll of membership.

4A.4 Opportunities

What might be different/ what opportunities are being missed?

In a way, the main theme of this question could be 'opportunities for change'. Ministers were asked to explore what could be done better or be developed further, what opportunities were being missed in their opinion and, no less important, what might be discontinued – what activities had had their day, passed their sell-by date.

Here there was an outright winner – a need to break out from what was felt to be a straightjacket. There was real dissatisfaction with some rigidity in church life, whether that be from rules and regulations, bureaucracy, insularity of congregations or old-fashioned models of church. Following close behind were new approaches to ministry and better connections with the community and contemporary culture. A fourth theme was the lack of resources, whether that be people, time or practical support. There was also recognition of a collective depression that was felt in many places.

4A.4.1 Rigidity in church life

That the United Reformed Church should be accused of rigidity was something of a surprise. There is a common misconception that anything goes in the URC, whether that be the way things are done or the things people believe. There is some truth in this. Many churches still cling to their former Congregational traditions and it is something of a commonplace amongst members that the word 'normally' is placed in any statement that could in other circumstances be called a rule. Equally it is rare for a General Assembly to instruct churches or members to do anything. They merely 'request', 'advise' or, at its most insistent, 'strongly urge'.

In reality, there are rules and the fact that the Basis of Union was established by Act of Parliament makes it both difficult and costly to amend. Over forty years from its inception, there are still those in leadership who were practising members of the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches and the Church of Christ who struggle with some of the inevitable compromises that were made and hold out against any further weakening of their traditions. For the first time, in 2012, it was agreed that there could be post-ordination training that was mandatory and the first of these came in in 2014. For many ministers of the old school this came as something of a shock. They had known nothing to be compulsory before this.

The sense that 'out of the box' thinking – and acting – was needed was expressed in different ways and different speakers identified different areas of rigidity. One hospital chaplain was particularly eloquent –

I think the one biggest thing I would change is to get rid of all the stodgy um thinking I mean I think the URC claims to be a broad church and yet it narrows itself in the way in which it restricts what you can do in ministry cos that's what we're talking about I mean I'm constantly frustrated at General Assemblies when you know you try and get something moving and someone says 'you can't' and all this 'order mr. chairman' sort of stuff you know and I don't know if it's still like that but I remember times when we were trying to introduce the role of evangelist and er it was 'oh we can't do that because they won't be ordained and they need that kind of theological education so they must do that first and then they can become an evangelist' and I knew people who would be brilliant evangelists and be very willing to be trained but not in that way (HC2,p5)

A similar frustration was expressed by another speaker, regarding the URC approach to church-planting –

. . . the Baptists are heavily into church planting I mean this had a history because we both basically had an ecumenical set-up in a (. . .) new estate um and a Baptist a few years ago volunteered to move into one of the houses and now the Baptist Association has decided it's a Baptist church and left everybody else fuming but what was raised at that was well what are we other denominations we're so hidebound by having to provide ministry to every church (LM1,p5)

She went on to expound on other ecclesiological shortcomings –

I'm gonna put my head on the line and say that there are a few churches that have had their day and I realize that the URC you know we cannot close a church only a church can do that and that's the problem in that respect because maybe we should be closing more churches so that

we can put more effective ministry into places where there is huge mission opportunity (LM1,p5)

And she was by no means alone in this view. The need to think more creatively about ministry was a common thread through most of the conversations.

one thing I think we're really missing in the URC is the uniqueness of our freedom and conciliarity you say 'missing' you mean we don't use it I don't think we use it to be creative enough (SM4,p7)

There was concern that having to offer ministry across a growing number of churches – in the South Western Synod, the biggest group is of 5 churches - and how that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to know both congregations and communities well enough to minister well. Rigidity and ecclesiology combined to frustrate one speaker:

we're so hidebound by having to provide ministry to every church I mean Anglicans have to legally yes but even we do it and the Methodists in our own sweet way (LM1,p5)

The demographic challenge of ageing and decreasing congregations was also cited as a challenge, which in some cases meant the minister in pastoral charge having to take on more of the administrative tasks than before. And while I would not want in any way to equate age with nostalgia and a clinging to old ways of being church, one minister expressed his frustration in graphic terms –

I think most of us talk about being prepared and perceptive enough to give up you know what has had its day em and I think there are one or two churches that keep flogging the not just dead but putrefying horse (laughter) juggling bones (SM5,p5)

4A.4.2 New approaches to ministry

This filling up of the time with congregational matters has in some places meant a lack of time for outreach –

. . . I've been too busy being a minister doing whatever it is I'm doing and meetings . . . something's not right if I'm not if I'm too busy being church then I'm not involved in the community em and it's all been worthwhile stuff but it means I've lost touch somewhere (SM6,p7)

4A.4.3 A sense of depression

The perceived lack of active members, coupled with having to share a Minister with 2,3 or 4 other churches is clearly leading to a feeling of depression, where simply 'holding the fort' is as much as is felt possible and exploring new ideas led to more frustration. We have not yet heard the last iteration of the cry 'We tried that once and it didn't work'.

This is a significant feature of life in the United Reformed Church at the present time and one that arises again in the 'Resources' section of this chapter.

There comes across in these speakers a real sense of frustration with an institution that, for all its celebration of being born out of dissent, is seen to have created its own conformity and resistance to experiment and creativity. The reality of falling roles and ageing congregations in many, though not all, places makes some feel a sense of urgency that is being stifled by 'the way we do things'.

4A.5 Aspirations

I had this dream once of the church where there would be a minister of the Word and a minister of the sacrifice er

the sacraments and a minister of the money you know and a minister of the catering and a minister of the you know you'd have everybody everybody's role was equal within the structure and people didn't look to the person that stood at the front preaching the Word as the one in charge because actually they're just part of the whole business of building the kingdom (LP1,p4)

Not many speakers spelled out such a comprehensive vision of ministry, at least not one so creative and different in its approach, but at a day for Ministers in June 2016, those present were asked to take part in a 'cardboard testimony' exercise. This was something that had been observed on an internet site, where people held up pieces of card with, on one side, those things that were causing them distress or anxiety and on the other, how they would like their lives to be. The results for the Ministers are tabled below:

causing anxiety or distress	how it might be
Straight-jacket 'We're doomed'	Fun Hope Joy Freedom
One Minister – 2 or 3 churches Maintaining structure – filling of roles - forms of service - expected to be the only visible leader	Team ministry – ordained lay leaders Local emphasis to membership
From 'the way we were' to 'the way God wants us to be'	Focus on growing community less on maintaining institution 'what we've always done' Developing disciples Experiments rather than projects Leadership - enabling
Ministry now – alongside facilitating teaching leading caring Is very 'in the church'	Enabling missional community with a clear Christian identity
1. stretched ministry (stick man – wavy line – stick man lying down)	1. focussed ministry 2. re-evangelise church

<p>2. too many in wrong roles</p> <p>3. shifty feet in light compost</p>	<p>3. rooted in community & context</p>
<p>There's no point</p>	<p>Transforming relationships</p>
<p>Look after me (feed me!)</p> <p>Running the church/service the system</p> <p>Plough own furrow</p> <p>Don't just speak to the crowd</p> <p>X (grumpy face)</p> <p>Acer(?)</p> <p>God's intention . . . empowering people</p> <p>Our problem . . . no signal</p>	<p>Help me grow, make me hungry</p> <p>Facilitate functioning teams . . . invest in the few</p> <p>√ (smiley face)</p>
<p>Obsession with Sundays</p> <p>Keeping 'church' going</p>	<p>People centred</p> <p>Immersed in the world</p> <p>Reflecting God's love</p>
<p>'A mess' – fear, vulnerability, uncertainty, lack of direction, isolation</p> <p>Tired</p> <p>Still with a model of church that hasn't evolved – not suited for 21st century purposes</p> <p>Ministers selected and trained for traditional ministry</p> <p>A willing but aged congregation</p> <p>The church is needy pastorally and building wise</p>	<p>Continuing with the external volunteering they do but more evangelistically</p> <p>Potential fulfilling</p> <p>Reaching out as priority over maintenance</p> <p>Eagerness for more faith – more prayer</p> <p>Be more creative</p> <p>Celebrating what we have</p> <p>Resourced</p> <p>Inspired enthusiastic</p> <p>Christ centre – instead of 'keeping the show on the road', devising a new show!</p>
<p>Stretched elastic band</p> <p>Fearful fire-fighting</p>	<p>Chinese skipping rope³⁸</p> <p>Engaged empowerment</p>

³⁸ This refers to a game played in junior schools in the 1960s and later, that involved looping rubber bands together to make a large elastic loop that was placed around two pairs of ankles and used for a jumping game.

Some of those present had been interviewed as part of the field-work study, but more had not, so it was interesting and affirming to see the same themes appear: creative approaches to ministry, particularly working in teams; community building and enabling the people to use their gifts; engaging in the wider world.

4A.6 Resources

How might change be effected?

In responding to the question about how change might be brought about, ministers were less certain, but still had suggestions to offer. Three very different, but equally important, approaches were called for – a change in structures (new forms of ministry, team working, different ways of training and forming ministers), better relationships (within and without congregations, between churches, with the community) and spiritual growth, including enabling people to use their gifts more effectively. The first two of these correspond quite clearly to the areas of church life where there were opportunities for change. There was, however, also a sad recognition that there were some churches that simply needed honest palliative care.

4A.6.1 Change in structures

Ideas about new forms of ministry inevitably focus on enabling the laity to play their part in a ministry of all members –

how do we do it is that something about confidence
is that something about the church growing and gaining
confidence it's so easy I think it's so easy to become
complacent and actually church to become a club that we go

to but actually having the confidence to step outside and say oh yea you can do this and valuing the skills within church there's a whole range of skills you know people that go to church there's a whole lifetime of skills especially churches that are getting older there's a lot of wisdom a lot of experience a lot of skills a lot of retired people with skills that we can draw on somehow it's just connecting those skills with what's needed out there to develop mission (LM2,p4)

Local church leadership is beginning to be established in a more ordered way in the South Western Synod and that was recognised as another way to add to the ministry menu, as was rethinking the way in which Ministers are deployed. A radical approach to this was voiced by one speaker –

I think it would be better for churches to be in vacancy as the norm and then have a minister now and then who comes in and spends all their time with that one church possibly two but I would think one and actually helps them work out where they are and where they're going or if they need to close I think it's the wrong way round I think expecting 10% of a minister for 5 years and then be in vacancy for 2 is less effective than expecting having a minister full time for two years who helps to set you on your path and then lets you go on with it for 5 year and then comes back in that's one way I think of possibly helping to reignite churches (SM4,p6)

The speaker thinks that will never happen, but still thinks it might work.

There were some who wanted a bit of risk-taking, stretching the structures as far as possible, experimenting with different approaches to ministry.

This experimenting could include introducing local church leaders, even where there was a Minister of Word and Sacrament in place:

you see I still think I would like to see in each of our five churches one person who is the leader uhuh and I know [.] is and he's really good and people do see him as the Minister but I think to expect one person to be in five places as the leader (LP1,p7)

Inevitably this will impact on the training of ministers, of all kinds:

but I think one of the things we're going to have to do is have a real real big think of what we're training Ministers for well in our in our training colleges (LM1,p7)

And sometimes the challenge is to recognise the end of that church's life.

It may not be simply about 'closing the church' –

you know the fact I've preaching this message that says get rid of your churches when they're a bind rather than don't close the church just get rid of your building continue as a worshipping community and that is a message that simply cannot break through with you can be a perfectly viable worshipping community without necessarily having the onus of this big Victorian building (GM1,p3)

It is a particular challenge of the ecclesiology of the URC that only a church meeting can end the life of a church, but many see the signs long before the inevitable end and one speaker suggested that there needs to be a kind of 'hospice' ministry to churches at this stage. Having told a story of the congregation that left its building to go into 'sheltered housing' – sharing a building with another church – she reflected –

they describe that as 'we got to the stage where we knew we needed to be in sheltered housing' . . . and so for our point in our life journey that was that was an appropriate act and they wrote a couple of articles about you know the story of why they'd done that and part of me says we do need people in leadership positions who know the possibilities and who can help the churches that are in that place make those kind of decisions (SM1,p9)

4A.6.2 Better relationships

There were also some who thought the structures we have could be used better –

one of the things that the Areas could usefully do getting people together to try and come to terms with the past and envisage the future because we do that sort of thing at spring school but there isn't such an opportunity for thinking church people who know that things are changing but they can't put a handle on it

and they're looking for direction in which to go
and that's not the sort of thing you can deal with in a 12
minute sermon on a Sunday morning (SM3,p5)

The underlying current in all this is about building up the congregations to
minister themselves, with trained leadership, paid or not, to resource and
support them. The interests and life of the church also influence the
ministry of the people and their ability to connect with the wider
community. One speaker gave an example of this –

part of it's engaging with the conversations that people are
having outside rather than just church and things
I mean the last Synod we went to cos others cos
they were talking about same-sex relationships well it's
the first time I've been able to talk to most of my family
about what's been going on at Synod cos they were
interested (NSM2,p5)

4A.6.3 Spiritual growth

Spirituality and the activity of the Holy Spirit were referred to at this stage
in the conversation and not necessarily as a last resort, but more as an
encouragement to let go control a little and allow some movement from
without –

and then you allow the Holy Spirit to work and the Holy
Spirit does magical things because God is an amazing God
and I think you have to be prepared to be surprised amazed
and challenged by God and that's not always easy
particularly when you're at a stage of life when really you'd
rather be comforted (SM4,p9)

These different responses seem to call for action at the individual, the local
congregation and the denominational levels. A sense of hope does shine
through the frustration.

4A.7 Differing views from different ministries?

Having looked at the responses and grouped them into themes, another way of analysing them is to look for differences between the different branches of ministry. Interviewees were grouped into three groupings. The first group was *Pastoral Ministers* (PM) in which were placed Ministers of Word and Sacrament, both stipendiary and non-stipendiary, who were in pastoral charge. The second category was *Other Ministers* (OM), which included Ministers of Word and Sacrament who were retired or working in different ministry contexts, such as chaplaincy. The third group was *Lay Ministers* (LM), which was a mixture of elders, lay preachers, lay workers, etc. There were 7 Pastoral Ministers (PMs), 7 Other Ministers (OMs) and 8 Lay Ministers (LMs), comprising 5 individuals and 3 groups of LMs. Starting with the first question about effective ministry, there was clear agreement across the field that worship and teaching were important as a way to grow faith, as was pastoral care and anything to do with food in community building. Difference came in their evaluation of youth work for growing faith, where 3 PMs and 5 OMs, as opposed to 1 LM spoke highly of its effectiveness:

They've also raised the funding for a family worker, but it's not just one person doing the work – she has a management group around her and around them a number of volunteers. (NSM1)

I'm a chaplain with the Air Training Corps and have been for 27 years um in every place I've moved they've just transferred me but where else do you get groups of teenagers who want the padre who want a minister to be with you who ask you to come to things (RM1)

I had a very small group of young teenagers who um who really benefitted from being big fish in a small pond rather

than going to the Anglican church where hundreds of children went to Sunday school and they were from the local council estate and it was a very middle class church and they were always kind of looked down upon the families were looked down upon and now I discover that one of them is candidating for ministry and the other two have started a Fury group (SM4)

Ordained Ministers (4 PMs, 4 OMs, 2 LMs) were also in the majority in seeing awareness of and relevance to the context of ministry as contributing to effectiveness in community building. On the other hand, in the same category, it was 4 LMs and 4OMs, and only 2 PMs, who valued the ministry of openness or presence:

but I think it's when we're out in the world I think it's when we're not expecting to meet people on our terms and I think that's quite key for people who feel vulnerable um a bit disillusioned it's that thing of being in their space and their time and just listening to them not with any um not with any expectation (GO1)

well I suppose the theological word for it is incarnation isn't it because you meet with somebody in their real life and possibly changing it just by being there not by doing anything else (HC1)

your starting place is a gentle coming alongside and creating a structure in which people feel safe ready to be open (NSM3)

All four Lay Ministers highlighted the importance of stewardship and generosity in ministry:

Money is also used well, so good stewardship. There is a lot of hard work to keep the buildings well-maintained. Money is not just kept, there is a willingness to spend on worthwhile projects, for example employing a community worker. (LM4)

There are obvious pressures on Pastoral Ministers that are not felt by the other two categories – regular worship leading and chairing of church and elders meetings, in addition to denominational calls on time – that take up

the time that might be used in 'loitering without intent', or practising a ministry of presence. Congregations can also be critical of Ministers who do not prioritise pastoral visiting of members. When a Minister has charge of a group of churches, over some miles, then responding to these requests can become stressful. Yet there is in the responses of those not in Pastoral Ministry a recognition that simply being with people – and by implication, not always church people – is a good use of time. Hospital chaplains might be expected to see the value in this way of ministry, it being for many the preferred *modus operandi*, but theirs were only two of eight voices. A paradox is created where the *espoused* and *operant* voices can become a little discordant and confusing – does a congregation want to be visited, or to see 'their' Minister out in the community?

It is unsurprising to find that Lay Ministers speak of money and stewardship more than the ordained. Stipendiary Ministers in particular are itinerant and do not have the family connection to church buildings of their congregations. Maintaining mid-Victorian buildings may be about family history and memories for the members, but Ministers can often see the depressive effect of that struggle and can be frustrated by a lack of vision. There is positive mention of fund-raising for other projects, but otherwise financial issues have been sidelined.

Overall, as already noted, there was much more agreement as to what was effective as ministry. There was much more disparity when it came to identifying opportunities for change or what resources were needed to effect such change.

Section 4.1 of this chapter made reference to the surprising number of responses that criticised the Church for its rigidity, when the question about opportunities for change was asked. However when looked at in detail, it appears that only 1 PM joined the 5 LMs and 3 OMs in bringing this up. What they called 'rigidity' was not confined to the church structures, but also expressed frustration with local church life and attitudes:

we're so hidebound by having to provide ministry to every church I mean the Anglicans have to legally yes but even we do it and the Methodists in our own sweet way (LM1)

I mean the coffee morning's out of date needs revamping cos they're still attitude of very cheap coffee and cheap (unclear) rather than making it a nice place to be so you get the same old regulars coming all the time (NSM2)

they get stuck in a bit of rut then and I think that's when we get back on this treadmill of always doing it the same way (GO1)

Do Stipendiary Ministers perhaps feel they have some responsibility for the seeming rigidity of the Church as a whole, through committee membership or as a part of Synod or General Assembly? This possibility is contradicted by ordained Ministers – 2 PM and 3 OM – being the ones who are critical of church bureaucracy. Otherwise there may a certain reluctance to criticise the hidebound and overly traditional local church ways, despite reassurance of anonymity. There is a strong feeling that what is *espoused* either from the centre or locally is not always observed in the practice of local congregations.

When it came to citing the resources that might effect positive change, it was almost all the Pastoral Ministers (6 PM, 1 OM, 1 LM) who saw enabling people , building capacity in congregations, as important. Those

Ministers feeling stretched may see this as a way of developing the local ministry without burning themselves out. Equally it could be seen to agree with those who thought that a teaching ministry was important. Though the numbers were small, the priority of spiritual growth was identified evenly across all three groups (2 PM, 3 OM, 3 LM).

Taken as a whole the differences in approach of the three groups are not insignificant. The crucial difference appears to be between Pastoral Ministers and others, rather than between lay and ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament³⁹. Ministers of Word and Sacrament working outside the pastorate system have a different perspective, particularly when working for other institutions, as hospital chaplains do.

4A.8 Lone voices – prophetic or idiosyncratic?

In any survey or questionnaire there will be responses that are unique, that are quite different from what is said elsewhere, or even contradictory.

Looked at as simple statistics on a graph, it is common to disregard these 'outliers' in favour of discerning norms. In this kind of survey of opinions, however, it is important to ask if these lone voices have significance. If someone consistently disagrees with general opinion, they might be dismissed as being too different. That is not the case in this survey, the outriding views were expressed by interviewees who at other times were in agreement with others. To take seriously such contributions, we must ask if they might be prophetic. Prophetic voices would seem to lie outside

³⁹ It must be acknowledged that most of the 'lay' ministers are ordained elders.

the four other theological voices that Cameron has identified. They offer the perspective of the one who has the imagination, coupled with experience, to see the consequences of certain behaviours and are able to propose a different future.

Thinking about effective ministry, only one interviewee, a Lay Minister, mentioned evangelism:

well one of the things you've got to do and it is ministry
you mustn't be afraid to let people know you're a Christian
and for a lot of people even that's just a huge step (LM1)

The United Reformed Church has an uneasy relationship with evangelism.

As in other 'broad churches', evangelism has become conflated with a conservative, if not actually fundamentalist, theology and those with different theologies have become uneasy about using the 'e-word', as it is sometimes referred to. The interviewee LM1 refers to this in the quote above. There is an obvious tension in this situation in that as Christians, the Church is called to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, and yet the evidence of the falling rolls shows that if this is happening, then it has been ineffective on the whole. That does not mean it is not necessary.

The lone voices on opportunities for change speak about the perpetuation of an old-fashioned Sunday School model and, not unconnected, the low expectations that are being expressed as the age profile of the congregation rises:

I also think there's a feeling that people reach a certain age
and they've retired from ministry and they've done
their bit and now it's time to hand over to younger people
if younger people aren't there then we'll pay someone to do
it and pay them to get the results (LM2)

Offering a more positive approach were the two interviewees, one Other Minister and one Lay Minister, who saw advantages in using the available structures and General Assembly resolutions⁴⁰:

one thing I think we're really missing in the URC is the uniqueness of our freedom and conciliarity *you say missing you mean we don't use it* I don't think we use it to be creative enough (SM4)

I like the idea of team ministry I like the idea of people discovering what their skills are in ministry and working with others who don't have their skill

...

but to have a team ministry where you got everything involved I think it would be so exciting (LP1)

These voices may be on their own in this survey, but not so in the denomination as a whole, as proven by the General Assembly debates.

They add to a growing chorus that seeks to create new *normative* theological positions and do lie in the general tradition of the prophets.

Finally, in considering necessary resources there are related lone voices, seeking local church leadership, different training for Ministers and better support structures:

you see I still think I would like to see in each of our five churches one person who is the leader (LP1)

but I I think one of the things we're going to have to do is have a real real big think of what we're training ministers for (LM1)

but they need to have some kind of support network because you can't go into somebody else's em situation and not bring some of that back with you you need some way of offloading it (NSM4)

⁴⁰ e.g. resolutions coming out of Patterns of Ministry and Equipping the Saints

These three comments are all different facets of a creative vision for the future, all in some tacit way critical of what is currently happening and as such have a prophetic sense about them.

To dismiss any of these voices would be to leave the picture of ministry incomplete.

4A.9 An accurate picture?

It is not enough just to take at face value the fieldwork findings. They need to be corroborated by checking them against other information. The first question was whether the ministers of the South Western Synod collectively recognised themselves as being reflected in the picture created by the individual interviews. To look wider, training and development officers in other Synods were asked if ‘their’ ministers would produce a similar picture.

4A.9.1 The Synod view

The first step in checking out this picture of ministry in the South West was to present the initial analysis to the Ministers at the day referred to above. Members of the Synod Pastoral committee were also present and joined in the reflections and discussion, which took the conversation further.

As the table of ‘Aspirations’ above shows, there was a definite sense of change being needed and quite urgently. However there was also recognition, as voiced by a number of interviewees that the system does not encourage change or movement. There remains a lingering understanding that ‘faithful church’ tends to equate with ‘big and

successful', which many at the meeting wanted to challenge. There can be a very real tension between holding on to what has stood the test of time and the need to move on. Yet one Minister suggested that what we fear can be the stimulus for successful change. He talked about the scene in chapter 10 of Luke's gospel when Jesus tells the disciples to 'go', taking little with them and making them rather exposed. But they thrived. Some of the smaller churches in the South Western Synod, ones identified as being in need of special, or indeed emergency, attention, have benefitted from being accompanied on their journey by an interim Minister, who stays for a couple of years, and so is in a position to challenge in a way that a settled Minister sometimes cannot.

Buildings inevitably cropped up in the conversation. The number of churches has not declined as fast as the number of members or ministers, meaning that many buildings are aged with few to care for them and of course, many of these are also Listed Buildings, which presents further difficulties. Sentimental attachment can be a hindrance, but perhaps we should see ourselves as 'passing through', as pilgrims, needing campsites, rather than buildings. 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' (Luke 9.58)

Finally, spiritual growth was identified as a key element, with a need to rebuild our understanding of the Gospel.

4A.9.2 Across the nations

As a further check on the validity of the data and resulting analysis, former colleagues – training and development officers - in other Synods were asked to review these findings and asked if this was the picture in their

Synod too. They were also asked if they had any evidence to base their responses on.

Though there was little formal evidence, responses from six Synods⁴¹ were based on solid experience of working with Ministers and churches across their Synods and all found the picture of ministry in the South Western Synod mirrored that in their own Synod.

One was particularly struck by the comment in section 3.3 that interviewees were less certain of what might be needed for change:

This definitely accords with my own experience, although I'd extend this to include elders and congregations. In other words, while many throughout the URC readily accept 'we can't go on as we are', they really struggle to think of possible alternatives. I find that Ministers are generally good at diagnosing what's deficient, but much less able to come up with feasible and practical ways forward.

. . .

I have pondered on possible reasons for this, but haven't any firm answers. Is it because we have become too blinkered by our systems; or is it because both Ministers and people have, for too long, bought into a dependency model in the guise of providing and receiving pastoral care; or is it because, despite all the talk of mission, few of us have yet grasped what this will mean and look like in 21st century Britain?

This idea of a kind of collusion between Ministers and congregations does chime with the fact that it was the non-Pastoral Ministers who more easily recognized the ministry possibilities in outreach and involvement in the community.

One Synod does have a more urban context than the others and also more churches with a black majority. Here the training and development officer

⁴¹ All responses received by email, but kept anonymous

thought the South Western experience was similar in many ways but there were particular differences:

I think the urban setting allows for great creativity because often areas have changed so much that churches have a lesser sense of their tradition and a clearer awareness of being able to be who they are now, rather than who they were 30 years ago.

On the other hand:

Many of our churches have a black majority in terms of membership and this gives a pressure to provide “proper” ministry (i.e. ordained). A small minority of our black MWS also believe that ordained is proper ministry and so bolster that view in their churches.

Other Synods have urban conurbations within them and will have the same experience of dealing with the passage of time, particularly in areas with changing local populations. Nor is the clericalism attributed to black majority churches unique to that context and that view has been endorsed by some of the more *formal* theological voices quoted in Chapter Two, in particular David Peel and Peter Taylor Forsyth.

One correspondent commented:

I think that the word ‘effective’ is one that is causing a great deal of stress - and some depression - amongst today’s ministers.

Looking back over ministries that have seen decline to the extent that the end of the story now appears inevitable in so many places, asking themselves whether those ministries have been ‘effective’ is not an encouraging or affirming experience.

Whilst it is possible to see the sense in this comment, the responses of the interviewees, even those who were less than positive about the contemporary situation, would not bear out this correspondent’s fears.

4B Scripture and ministry

4B.1 Preamble

The final question asked of the interviewees was about the way scripture inspired or underpinned their ministry. Scripture is traditionally one of the four foundations of theology - scripture, tradition, reason and experience⁴². The other three questions, discussed in the previous chapter, addressed experience. Analysis of recent United Reformed Church documents, prepared for discussion at Mission Councils and General Assemblies, opened up the tradition. The fourth foundation, reason, is represented by this work of analysis and reconstruction.

The method selected to explore the chosen Bible texts is Contextual Bible Study. This method, its origins, principles, strengths and weaknesses, was laid out in the Methodology chapter of this study.⁴³ Briefly this is a way of reading scripture that is not dependent on academic knowledge, though that is not neglected where relevant and available to the group. The prime driver for discussion is context: that of the original writer and that of the group studying the text. The process is laid out in the following table –

⁴² See Chapter 2, section 2.5.4

⁴³ See Chapter 3, section 4.4.1

- ❖ Read text aloud at least once; decide beforehand whether to use one or more translations

- ❖ What jumps out at you from this hearing/reading?

- ❖ Identify the characters and points of action in the passage – retell the story, or reword the text

- ❖ What do we know about this text from historical, literary, critical study?

- ❖ What light might this text throw on your context today?

- ❖ Is there something you are prompted to do by reading the text in this way?

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In practical terms, if the context has been identified, then there are two variables for the Bible Study leader - choice of texts and choice of participants. In this study the context is, of course, ministry in the URC.

4B.2 Scripture texts

The texts offered for study were, as previously indicated, chosen by the interviewees in response to the question - is there a Bible text or story that inspired or underpins your ministry? Not every interviewee offered a text and one or two referred to hymns that were significant to them. The texts are listed in the tables below with verbatim comments made as explanation or in support. There was a wide range of texts, not always obviously or overtly connected to ministry or roles within ministry.

Chosen by Ministers of Word and Sacrament:

TEXT	SUMMARY	INTERVIEWEE'S REMARKS
Genesis 32.22-31	Jacob at the ford of Jabbok	he was blessed by being given a new name . . . so it's learning a new identity . . . a way of being in a situation that might wound you (NSM3)
Psalms 23	The Lord is my shepherd	got to talk 'bout the shepherd who doesn't . . . use somebody else or give away his responsibilities . . . is there with the flock (RM1)
Jeremiah 1.4-10	The call of Jeremiah	particularly because it talked about not being able to speak properly (NSM2)

		<i>(the interviewee had particular vocal problems himself)</i>
Ezekiel 37.1-14	The field of dry bones	
Hosea 11.1-4	Led with cords of kindness	<i>(image of) God leading a child (SM5)</i>
Micah 6.6-9	What does the Lord require?	
Matthew 13.31-32	Parable of the mustard seed	it's there . . . it will grow . . . dormant (SM7)
Mark 5.1-10	Legion and the Gadarene swine	that was heavily influential in my prison ministry . . . but also generally the whole being released and renewed . . . and the change in the community (SM4)
Luke 10.25-37	Parable of the good Samaritan	
Luke 15.11-32	Parable of the prodigal son	not so much the prodigal son as the celebrating father (SM3) <i>(through further conversation it was clear that this was the God to be made known in ministry)</i>
2 Corinthians 5.17	A new creation	we don't sign up to a set of rules . . . something's got to be done within us to change us as people . . . and yet retain the people that we really are (HC2)

Chosen by elders:

TEXT	SUMMARY	INTERVIEWEE'S REMARKS
Psalm 139	O Lord you search me and you know me	you can't put on a telephone voice with God . . . he knows you through and through (LM3)
Mark 6.47-52	Walking on the water	
Mark 12.28-31	The greatest commandment	it's about being in tune so loving God . . . being open to God working through you and also loving people . . and that's service (LM2)
John 21.15-19	Feed my sheep	because sheep are important to me and because . . . I identify with the shepherd and looking after God's people and just being there to feed and be fed (GO1)
Acts 16.11-15	Lydia at Philippi	they draw people together and they somehow build a community (LP1) <i>(interviewee is talking about the role of the host/leader)</i>

No text was chosen more than once and an obvious first comment is that none of the elders selected a passage from the prophets. For the most part texts were not identified by chapter and verse, apart from the psalms, and when they were, the references tended to be inexact. It was the content or the story that was important and indeed, most of the chosen

texts were stories, rather than something abstract or overtly theological. 2 Corinthians 5.17 is a significant exception to these observations - identified by its reference and stating a theological truth, though even here the interviewee translated it into a personal narrative.

The themes arising from these texts, as indicated by the remarks of their selectors, arrange themselves into three categories - the tasks of ministry, relationship with God and the possibilities of growth and transformation - all of which have their roots in relationships. The tasks of ministry described here, pastoral care (Psalm 23, John 21) and community building (Mark 5, Acts 16) are clearly about the relational aspects of ministry.

Preaching and prophecy are noticeable by their absence. A clear majority of the texts are concerned with a relationship with God (Hosea 11, Luke 15, Mark 12; but also Genesis 32, Psalm 23, Jeremiah 1, John 21). This was to be expected but there is also an acceptance of the way in which that relationship can be personally transformative (Genesis 32, Ezekiel 37, Matthew 13, 2 Corinthians 5, Mark 12). Each of these themes is evident in the two groups of texts.

4B.3 Hermeneutics

Narrative was the most important factor. Even the psalms chosen have a narrative core. Whether it be walking through the valley of the shadow of death, struggling with a stranger, looking out over a valley of dry bones, meeting the risen Jesus on the shore line or gathering by a river to pray and hearing the words of Paul, it is possible to insert oneself into the scene in the imagination. Reading then becomes emotional as well as intellectual, an act of the imagination as well as an academic learning

experience, and develops a meaning beyond mere words and their definitions.

Coming at Scripture in this way - working backwards from experience, rather than looking for initial instructions - turns Bible study on its head.

Craig Bartholomew relates this approach to the hermeneutical task -

Practical theology is concerned with contemporary experience and culture so that it is not surprising that its relationship to the Bible is not straightforward.

(Ballard & Holmes 2005, p144)

Bartholomew is alluding to the undisputed fact that the Bible has its own context - time, place and culture of writing - which means that there is a very real difficulty sometimes in finding its relevance to the present context. There can be a need for an, at times complicated task of interpretation and care must be taken not to lose the original sense or intention of the writer, if the Bible is still to be taken seriously as a normative source for Christian living.

A historical-critical method does, however, still have its place in situating the Bible in its original context and an understanding of the lives and times of the writers and their characters can help in the interpretative task.

However if we are seeking to use the Bible as a resource for 21st century ministry that is not enough. The diverse voices in scripture will never give us a definitive rule book and the changes in philosophical, psychological, technological and other scientific knowledge and understanding have in many ways alienated us from the worlds of the founding fathers and the early church.

An example of this is the way in which Jesus' teaching on prayer (Luke 18.9-14), using the Pharisee and the tax-collector as examples, has had its impact subtly changed through time. Jesus' original hearers would have been expecting that the Pharisee would be the more commended for praying in the temple and also for their religious devotion and commitment to a life aligned with the Ten Commandments. They would have been shocked to hear the tax-collector, often thought of as colluding with the occupying forces, being commended as more pleasing to God than the Pharisee. The story becomes a way of teaching humility before God. However twenty-first century readers have come to think of the Pharisees as spiritually arrogant at best and hypocritical self-seekers at worst. They know that Jesus called a tax-collector - Matthew/Levi - to be one of the disciples and are also familiar with the story of Zaccheus, the corrupt tax-collector forced to face up to his dishonest and make amends. Tax-collectors can change their ways, but although there are references to 'good' Pharisees, the overwhelming impression given in all four Gospels is negative. So a reader today will immediately pick out the tax-collector as the example of someone pleasing God and want to see themselves in the same way. There is no shock value to Jesus' story and if there is a feeling of self-satisfaction it is likely to be with the reader today.

As Anthony Thiselton asserts:

However, hermeneutics in the more recent sense of the term begins with the recognition that historical conditioning is two-sided: *the modern interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given historical context and tradition (sic)* (Thiselton 1980, p11)

This historical conditioning, often referred to in philosophical writing as *tradition or pre-understanding* requires acknowledgement if the process of understanding is to bear real fruit. This coming together of different contexts, or *fusion of horizons*, to use Hans-Georg Gadamer's expression (Thiselton 1980, p307), almost inevitably generates a new context, and so the process is not an enclosed circle, but a spiral, new understandings being made possible by each rotation.

John Campbell describes this as entering into God's conversation:

The Bible invites us to a conversation where we may meet and interact with God and with God's people in a way that enables us to find ourselves and discover how we ought to live. (Campbell 2003, p114)

Campbell speaks of such a conversation as being open, in a way that debate is often not. Debate can be shut down with proofs and appeals to tradition and authority, while conversation, as true dialogue, can open up the encounter. There is within conversation the possibility, which some might view as risk, of new insights, changed perspectives. This open conversation is also to be perceived within scripture itself and the hermeneutical invitation is to enter into this conversation in order to discover both the voice of God and our own true voice.

4B.4 Bible Study groups

The intention was to form two separate groups - one consisting of Ministers of Word and Sacrament and one of ordained serving elders. The primary group of Ministers was drawn from the ministers serving the URC churches in North Wales. This group knew each other fairly well and as a colleague, although I had set up the group and guided the study through

the different stages, I was able to be a co-participant. The Ministers were given the first list of texts to choose from and after some negotiating decided to read Jeremiah 1.

At a meeting of URC Ministers from across the Synod of Wales, a second study was carried out using small self-directed groups, given the method in outline, the choice of texts and then reporting back to a plenary session. This group was given the same list, minus the text already studied, and chose Psalm 23, Micah 5 and Mark 5.

Two elders groups met - a group of four and a group of nine. These are elders serving in the three churches I serve. In these groups I was clearly the study leader. These groups were given the second list and the smaller group chose Acts 14 and larger Mark 12.

All groups were given in advance brief information on the nature of the study group and an outline of the Contextual Bible Study method. The local groups met in my living room, gave written consent and were recorded. The ministers group and the smaller elders group were transcribed and any direct quotes come from these. Extensive notes were taken at the other meetings.

4B.4.1 Group dynamics

Contextual Bible Study leans heavily towards this way of reading scripture but one of its strengths is its whole-person approach which means that prior learning also has its place. The Ministers' group was thus enabled to draw upon its college historical-critical study, placing the call of Jeremiah in its own context, leading to a discussion that was both personal - drawing on the Ministers' contexts - and correlational - seeking to understand the

feelings and needs of an adolescent in the 21st century. The elders' groups were more mixed in their learning backgrounds. More questions were asked about Philippi in the first century, seeking to understand at more than a surface level the nuances of the narrative, but then the group proceeded as had the ministers.

The role of the leader in each of the two groups was therefore subtly different. With other Ministers, once the process was understood, it became a group of equals, with one of us, myself, keeping time and on track. I was able to be a participant and the transcript attests to a balance of speakers. With the elders, I was more clearly the leader: drawing on college bible study, in a position of authority as their Minister. The transcript shows my speaking as being more informative than personal. Walter Wink has cautionary words for those seeking to lead this kind of Bible study:

Unless, as leaders, we ourselves are 'on the way', and are struggling at the long, arduous, largely unseen task of integrating the lost or wounded parts of our own selves . . . then our leadership will hardly evoke these kinds of commitments in others. (Wink 1990, p78)

Wink speaks of the need for the leader to be as open to transformation as the other participants. If the aim is to move from the traditional approach, where it is assumed that that a text has one meaning and the Minister knows what that is, to the conversational approach described by Campbell (Campbell 2003, p115), it is essential that the leader is not, subconsciously maybe, still giving out the impression that s/he has all the answers.

4B.5 Issues raised in conversation with Ministers

The group of Ministers of Word and Sacrament, discussing the first chapter of Jeremiah, homed in, perhaps unsurprisingly, on the issue of vocation.

The text does deal with the call of the young man, a call that came at a difficult time in the nation's history:

it was in a very difficult period in history because basically he's got to go out and tell the people that they're going to go into exile and there's not a lot of good news there (CBS/M/3)

This called to mind times when the call had involved dealing with difficult situations - standing up to bullies, for example, both on behalf of someone in the congregation and for oneself. Discipline was thus identified as one aspect of effective ministry.:

I dunno how good you are at church disciple - em it's the bit that scares the living daylights out of me and yet I understand that it's a necessary part that if you actually want to nurture people and grow them to maturity you actually have to deal with their problems (CBS/M/3)

Debating the age of Jeremiah at the time of calling, it was agreed that he was likely still to be a teenager and there was discussion about the way in which it was, or was not, possible to discern and enable the vocation of others. We all agreed that other people had played a part in our own sense of call and, indeed, the assessment process of the URC necessitates a recognition of a candidate's calling by the congregation. It is not always easy for Ministers to have time to get to know any young people, so some frustration was expressed at not being able to spot potential in this way, even though it was felt to be part of the task of ministry:

the reality is for me that I haven't done a . . . youth address for donkey's years I say donkey's years I haven't done one for many years in my last pastorate the only time I ever did a youth address was for Girls' Brigade church parade once a quarter (CBS/M/4)

Reflecting on Jeremiah as the son of a priest, there was some reflection on the tensions that ministry can place on the Minister's family:

as a mother particularly it's the church takes me away from them makes me unavailable you know the quote is that Easter Day and there's Easter Eggs and family time and there's a phone call in the afternoon somebody's just died and you you know I'm very good at not responding to (unclear) but I really need to go and that's like you've done your church stuff mum you've done all of Jesus died stuff now it's our time you know and that kind of sums it up and it's me not being available for them (CBS/M/2)

Church ministry is not unique in this way; other professions make demands on a person's time and attention beyond the normal nine-to-five, but living in a church house can feel like a goldfish bowl to young people and the costs of ministry are borne by the whole family and not just the Minister:

and just because I mean all the reassurances in that passages as well you know I will deliver you just because it says all that doesn't make it any easier does it (laughs) . . . it's still a struggle and it's still a struggle to maintain that but then (unclear) if you feel the call then you can't do anything you can't do any other can you (CBS/M/5)

In the shorter self-directed groups, there arose a range of issues. The group reading the story of the Gadarene swine focussed on the life transformed, but also found themselves led to a consideration of healing and mental health issues. The reading of Psalm 23 gave some reassurance: reading the psalm in the context of ministry drew new responses from the group. They identified there a life lived in tension - travelling both the

meadows and the valley of the shadow of death - which did not dodge the realities of life but led to confirmation by God. The third group read the Micah text and from the beginning found a sense of groundedness - 'Mortal' - and also noticed the active mode of the verbs - 'do justice, love mercy and walk' - reminding themselves that this is what is required by God. Together the readings offered both reassurance of the transformational power of God and also the challenges thrown out by God. Both were recognised as aspects central to the life of ministry.

4B.6 Elders talking about ministry

The elders group that explored the story of Lydia and the formation of the new church at Philippi clearly identified hospitality and generosity as key aspects of ministry:

but in that sort of area they were used to putting up people anyway weren't they it's not like us the fact that she actually invited them to her household it must be the done thing because we wouldn't invite strangers into our house (CBS/E/4)

Here too were thoughts about being made new through accepting the gospel:

but perhaps the fact that you could become a new person appealed to them with being fully immersed in the river you go in and come out a fresh person she probably thought that sounds really good I'd like to have a go at that (CBS/E/5)

In addition, they heard a challenge in the fact that Lydia brought her whole household to be baptised:

well she actually brought her household to be baptised I can't honestly say that church full stop . . . people sort of come in and have gone off so nobody's committed but she did (CBS/E/4)

The other group discussed the greatest commandment, leading to an exploration about what it means to love one's neighbour, whoever that might be. The need also to love oneself was thought an important component and precursor to being able to love others. Jesus was also taken as a model for ministry in the way in which he was open to questions and responded in a non-judgemental and non-confrontational manner.

4B.7 Correlation with other field-work results

The first three questions to interviewees led to three themes establishing themselves as key to contemporary ministry - growing faith, community building and stewardship and generosity. These three themes can also be identified in the above analysis of conversations about the Biblical texts.

Identifying and enabling vocations was a key part of the discussion about Jeremiah; Jesus' answering questions - both fit with the concept of growing faith as did Paul's ministry to the group of women by the river in Philippi and the transformed life of the demoniac, which led to him becoming a disciple himself. Teaching and healing, and in Jeremiah's case calling, all lead to transformation, which is central to a growing faith.

Community-building was clearly illustrated by the hospitality and welcome shown by Lydia. The need to love neighbours leads to the identification of community as the context for ministry. That community is built up by shared concern and care. The importance of community is also noticed in the passage about the Gadarene swine, when Jesus tells the healed man to go back to his community and tell them the Good News.

Lydia's generosity of spirit was commended, though stewardship was perhaps not in evidence in these discussions.

A fourth theme emerged during the Biblical discussions - that of sustaining ministry. The ministers' conversation picked this up in a number of ways - referring to the importance of a personal vocation as a pre-requisite and the need to recognise and bear the costs of dealing with difficult disciplinary matters and with possible family tensions. Being open to the possibility of change and the potential that can be released through transformation were agreed factors in sustainability.

4B.8 Scripture as a resource for ministry

Both types of group - ministers of Word and Sacrament and elders - found the Contextual Bible Study method helpful. The Ministers did not have to leave their college learning behind, but could draw on their memories of Old Testament theology classes and historical-critical scholarship and it gave them a narrative within which to place themselves. That narrative being one about vocation and ministry in some ways validated their own experiences of vocation and uncertainty and difficult situations. There was a sense that the whole of the ministerial life was included in the conversation - vocation, pastoral tasks, frustrations, family life - in a way that is not always the case.

The breadth of texts chosen by the interviewees demonstrated the wider view of ministry that is emerging from this study and the further discussions in small groups at the Ministers' day brought out other

different aspects of the life and work of ministry. It is in the piecing together of the different comments and thoughts that something like the whole picture emerges. This should provide a cautionary note: one Biblical text, however thoroughly mined for all it can provide, cannot on its own be a singular scriptural resource for ministry that will be right and relevant for all types of people and ministries and times.

The recorded session with the elders - reading the Acts 16 passage about Lydia at Philippi - showed how an understanding of the original context of the story illuminated the text and brought it more to life than a simple first-glance reading would do. That may seem an obvious remark to make, but it does provide an argument against those who might think Contextual Bible Study was only interested in the reader's context. The group wanted to know more and found themselves speculating when the facts were illusive. They created a fuller narrative that gave them a picture to compare their church life with.

Both groups found themselves affirmed by the texts in different ways. Ministers recalled their own experiences of the call of God on their lives and elders had memories of impressive preachers who had been influential in their own lives. The universality of the narratives gave them a place to start on their own reflections. But neither group stopped with this affirmation and both were prepared to address the ways in which the texts disturbed and challenged them. For the ministers this challenge came from the need to speak out with difficult truths, to be the prophetic or disciplining voice that is not always welcome. A second challenge came from the discussion of vocation and young people and how ministers are

able to play a part in this discernment, given current worship practice and the demands on ministers' time. On the elders' part, it was the way in which Lydia brought people to Paul, and encouraged their spiritual journey, that was disturbing, particularly to a church that struggles with the word 'evangelism', as many do.

The choice of texts is clearly crucial, but so too is the willingness to go beyond the obvious and simply enjoy a 'nice familiar story'. Entering into conversation with the text is the way to draw out all the riches of the text, both the entertaining and reassuring and the discomfiting and disturbing.

Working through this thoroughly gives the exercise a generative edge.

There is movement in the minds of the readers as the conversation takes them into new territory and offers the possibility of transformation. The sessions were found to be enjoyable, as well as helpful, despite the challenges thrown out and the difficulties brought to mind.

It is perhaps worth saying that the Ministers on the whole spoke in the first person, while the elders spoke more collectively, using 'we' more often.

Inevitably Ministers, in a leadership role across a number of congregations - as all those in the groups were - more often see their role in isolation.

They will at times see themselves as part of an individual church's team, but theirs is a subtly different relationship to that of elders. On the other hand, elders may have individual roles and ministries but are clearly an Elders Meeting and have collective responsibility.

It is interesting to note that, despite the prophets being in evidence in the selection of texts chosen, prophecy, and indeed preaching, were not

identified as aspects of effective ministry. No one piece of work will be all-encompassing and this is no exception. It is worth, though, examining the use of language here. 'Prophecy' has become more akin to 'prediction', with the adjective 'prophetic' normally used to describe something that came about⁴⁴. The challenge and critique of prophecy, in its scriptural use, may well still be considered an aspect of ministry, but it is less often a public aspect. Similarly 'preaching' has come to be thought of as a finger-wagging exercise, while teaching - not synonymous, but related - has less negative connotations. There has been critique in the discussions and 'growing faith' and 'community building' are often the rationale behind a good sermon. Language evolves and perhaps what is required here is the facility of a bridge between church cultures then and now.

4B.8.1 Comparison with the previous theology of ministry

Despite the often-stated bases of theology including scripture as an essential element, the existing theology of ministry, issued by the United Reformed Church in 1995, does not reference scripture at all. The emphasis was less on the task of ministry and the role of ministers as on the needs of the institution and its organisation. The ecumenical drive that had created the United Reformed Church, finally established in 1972, was still apparent in this piece of work, written just twenty years later, as it

⁴⁴ The Cambridge Dictionary definition of 'prophecy' is: a statement that says what is going to happen in the future, especially one that is based on what you believe about a particular matter rather than existing facts <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/prophecy> accessed 13th February 2020

was ecumenical documents that were referred to, such as *God's Reign & Our Unity*, the report of the Anglican-Reformed International Commission of 1984 and *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry*, the 1982 Lima Document of the World Council of Churches.

The process was therefore led by a need to establish both traditional Reformed credentials and the stated commitment to ecumenism. A further twenty and more years later, the needs of the church are very different and this study, led as it is by the experience of practising ministers offers a living commentary on that earlier document. It endorses certain ways of being, but is also very critical of others and provides evidence, if such were necessary, that no theological statement can stand for all time. Experience, a late arrival to the established foundations of Scripture, Tradition and Reason, is the key that makes theology relevant, if temporary. Without that input, theology remains an academic exercise that may or not be reflected in the practise of those engaged in ministry today. It gives the *operant* voice a space in which to speak up with, or possibly against, the *formal, normative* and in some cases even the *espoused* voices.

4C Discoveries and issues

4C.1 Strengths - Effective ministry

What is effective ministry? 'Effective' is quite a loaded word – linked with 'effect' and 'efficacy', there is a distinct suggestion of making a difference. That difference could be quantitative or qualitative. Interviewees focussed overwhelmingly on the qualitative effects ministry could have on individuals, congregations and the community. The numbers game was not in evidence – no-one suggested that new members constituted signs of effective ministry. That may be because they genuinely believe that numbers are not a significant factor, or because there has been more experience of shrinking membership and therefore other ways of evaluating ministry need to be found.

Valued effects of ministry are wide-ranging and include work both in and out of the church, done by a variety of different kinds of minister, both lay and ordained, concerned with the practical, the social and the spiritual. Growing faith through worship leading and teaching were identified as important by almost every participant, both interviewees and Bible study groups.

meaningful worship is good too – worship that people can engage with and perhaps get excited about and go and talk to friends about (GO1)
worship is the heart of what we do as a springboard (SM5)

The apostle Paul was called out as a role model, in particular his ability to relate to others – Greek women were not the natural companions of a couple of educated Jewish men. The worship mentioned was often special services – Harvest Festivals, baptisms, funerals, tea-time café-style

worship, songs of praise – rather than the regular Sunday worship. These are events that can attract irregular church-goers, as there is no expectation of being present next week.

‘Learning’ might be a better category than ‘teaching’, as the emphasis was very much on the Minister continuing his or her learning throughout ministry, in order to be able to have meaningful conversations with others:

we’re getting people coming now and asking you know ‘what is baptism and you know what does that mean’ things like that so they’re asking really pertinent questions which is great you know (LM3)

In this category too, there was a focus on the informal, occasional, contextual teaching moments.

Building community is a large part of effective ministry, be that the building up of the congregation or of developing strong relationships within the wider community. Hospitality is key to this, with food a central part in so many conversations. Eating together has many scriptural connections⁴⁵ and is a traditional part of church life: ‘Eating together’ is one of the Holy Habits identified by Andrew Roberts, based on the life of the early church in Acts 2 (Roberts 2016). Exploring the theology of hospitality and its significance for the life of the church, Elizabeth Newman says:

Henri Nouwen has said that we can offer hospitality only when we have a place or home from which to extend it. The distortions of hospitality that I have discussed all result from kind of homelessness. (Newman 2007, p33)

Those distortions, identified by Newman, include hospitality as privatised sentiment, a marketed exchange and exclusivity.

⁴⁵ e.g. Genesis 18.1-8 (Abraham entertains at Mamre), Exodus 13.3-8 (institution of the Passover feast), 1 Samuel 25 (Abigail brokers peace with David through the offer of food), Mark 14.12-26 (The Lord’s Supper), Acts 2.42-46 (the life of the early church)

But just as significant were the mentions of less observable ministry:
pastoral care, visiting, sitting with people in pain. The ministry of presence
– just being there, available and, often thereby, making oneself vulnerable
– was valued by many.

well I suppose the theological word for it is incarnation isn't
it because you meet with somebody in their real life and
possibly changing it just by being there not by doing
anything else (HC1)

Stewardship and generosity – and generosity was often linked with
hospitality – were less common features of effective ministry, but still
important. The maintenance of buildings that can be used well and for the
benefit of all is essential. Regular giving by members enable this and also
supports the costs of ministry but giving to give away is also praised.

We are used to raising money. The money for the new roof
was pledged at one church meeting. The church was very
much the social life of the people. There is also always a good
response to appeals – whether that is for 'things' FoodBank,
Open Door, Women's Aid, or money for Water Aid,
communion collections, special appeals. (LM4)

So pretty much the full range of ministry activities was named as effective,
but as already noted, there were differences in how they were rated⁴⁶.

Almost all interviewees and the elders' CBS group named worship as being
effective and other aspects of growing faith – teaching, enabling and youth
work – were spoken of by fewer interviewees, but right across the board.
However community building as a category had more mentions altogether,
with pastoral care and hospitality at the top, closely followed by the
ministry of presence, relationship building and being relevant to the

⁴⁶ see tables in Appendix

context. Listening could be coupled with any of these elements and working together was also valued by interviewees in all groups.

Stewardship was a lay ministers' category, both in the interviews and the Bible study. The care of buildings and the raising of money for other charitable groups was spoken of with some pride too, because it is the lay membership that is perhaps more involved, particularly on a day to day basis, in these tasks than the ordained ministry.

One factor that contributes to effective ministry only arose in the Ministers' CBS group and that was the issue of vocation – feeling called personally to a particular ministry was important for the effectiveness of that ministry. This spoke of a matching of gifts, of experience and possibly age to a particular task, which was not just about efficacy, but also about a sense of fulfilment and even achievement. Coupled with this was the need to discern vocation in others and enable them to fulfil their calling.

4C.2 Opportunities for change

What opportunities for change were identified? Such opportunities can come through new circumstances, new relationships or issues that ask for response. That change can be facilitated by ceasing to do something which is no longer effective, or by evaluating existing activity and finding ways to improve it.

The biggest number of responses came under the category of rigidity in church life. This feeling of rigidity came from church structures, seen as bureaucratic, from a narrowness of vision that kept things as they were

and increased the gap between those inside and those outside the church walls.

sometimes we create the culture in church it becomes so religious well the thinking is that people need to be coming to us (LM2)

I mean the coffee morning's out of date needs revamping cos they're still attitude of very cheap coffee and cheap (unclear) rather than making it a nice place to be so you get the same old regulars coming all the time (NSM2)
the dead horses are getting those who have grown into seeing the church as a social organisation to actually see it as something more yes you see them switch off in the sermon after you've done the exposition once you get onto the 'this means you' (SM7)

An equal number of interviewees named not reaching out as being something that needed to change:

I think we spend too much time being church and not enough time being Christians (SM6)
keeping the buildings open distracts from the real work of ministry. In some places church elders are becoming curators rather than missionaries. (NSM1)

The elders CBS group acknowledged their own sense of failure in this:

I can't honestly say that I've brought anybody to the church to be baptised brought anybody to the church full stop *except your children* yea but they've left (long confused section)
but they haven't stayed in the church and they were baptised as children but they were never made members mine are the same and I don't think I've brought anybody to church I think over the years

It is sometimes suggested that this insularity is a feature of an ageing congregation, but most people's daily lives are lived with all modern conveniences: church members fly round the world, use social media, keep up to date with various trends just as much as those who do not go to

church. It could be that the church offers a place to withdraw from the pace of change in society and a remembrance of how things used to be. The opposite side of this critique of church life and ministry is there in the appeal for new and creative approaches to ministry – real team work, developing a consistent theology that might underpin ministry and mission, encouraging and enabling more people to use their skills and talents.

Need to resource congregations better – re-educate them about the new kind of ministry they can expect.
Style of worship is important, but so is underlying theology.
Research with young people shows that quality is more important to them than style – we need to do things well.
'That will do' is not good enough. (GM1)

There is a saying in the theatre from the back-stage staff that 'This would be a great place to work, if it were not for the actors' and there is something of this attitude that comes through a little when change in the church is under discussion. Even the lay interviewees were to some extent part of the church leadership and it is the leadership that, for the most part, has a sense that things could be different if it were not for 'others' holding things back and preventing change. The tension between maintenance and mission is felt very strongly at times. This is not the only factor that is seen as an obstacle. Falling membership rolls and an ageing demographic create a palpable sense of depression, especially when they become manifest in dying churches and ever larger pastorates.

I'm gonna put my head on the line and say that there are a few churches that have had their day yes and I realize that the URC – you know – we cannot close a church – only a church can do that – and that's the problem in that respect because maybe we should be closing more churches (LM1)

the deployment of ministers – as the URC does it is a disaster
I think expecting Ministers to have 5 churches where they

don't even where the centre of the church life is worship whether people like it or not and yet the Minister isn't even there once a month (SM4)

One key outcome of these situations is the stress placed on stipendiary Ministers and their families. Ministers and congregations can collude to make the Minister feel responsible for everything and unable to give their own families the attention they need, leading to real mental health problems:

I remember a Baptist minister in N M relaying to the whole church congregation I think it was that one of his biggest regrets in having been in ministry so he was about to retire was the fact that his children hated church because as you've said they were being moved all the time and just when they found friends they were off um and they just hated the fact that the church had such a hold over their father (CBS Ministers)

A strong sense of vocation can help to alleviate some of the stress, but can also compound it if that vocation was, in the first instance, to a different kind of ministry than is possible in the given circumstances. A Minister who feels called to pastoral ministry with a congregation will often find it hard to adapt to more of an oversight kind of ministry, which is the reality in large multi-church pastorates.

There are always opportunities for change, but it is clear from many of the responses that blue-sky thinking is very often tempered by a negative view of current resources.

housing developments that mean that new villages are being built without any community infrastructure – no hall, no shop, no PO, no pub, no church. (GM1)

All this new building offers opportunities for mission and ministry and is clear to many, but the commitment to ecumenism can hold things up as

there is often a sense that the URC should always work in partnership and that approach is waning in other denominations, some of which are struggling with their own resource challenges and some of which are happy to plant a church themselves. But should an opportunity arise, the question is then about the availability of people, every bit as much as finance:

I mean on the whole until I moved here the average congregation was 60 to 80 reducing and I had small village churches as well yes with a work force that you could potentially call on of sort of 14 16 potentially more whereas now it feels like your workforce are all in their 70s 80s they don't have the energy (SM1)

4C.3 Aspirations

Is there a sense of hope at all amongst ministers? They – we – can as easily as any other group slide into a negative spiral that begins with saying 'it would be good if we could . . .' and ends with 'but it won't happen unless we find more . . .' However there is still a place for aspirations. Asked to be forward-looking and creative in their thinking, ministers will come up with a range of aspirations. The group of Stipendiary Ministers who carried out this exercise came up with a list that mirrors both the marks of effectiveness and the potential for change:

- ❖ team ministry: playing to one's strengths, mixed economy of leadership incorporating ordained, lay and commissioned
- ❖ developing disciples: building a sustainable future through enabling the spiritual growth of congregations

- ❖ clear identity: accepting difference but developing confidence in our own faith understandings
- ❖ transformed relationships: in the church, with other churches and with groups and individuals in the community
- ❖ people-centred: real contextual ministry and mission
- ❖ fulfilling potential: owning, discerning and enabling vocations
- ❖ more creative: experimental, risk-taking, learning from other churches and other spheres
- ❖ celebratory: celebrating not just the Church's festivals, but other life events

These aspirations relate very clearly to the 'growing faith' and 'building community' aspects of effective ministry. As such they do not represent a radical change of vision, but act as confirmation. Being more creative and developing a realistic approach to team working would clearly support the change anticipated and, in many instances, yearned for. Keeping the momentum up is essential for these aspirations to become reality. Simply listing them at an annual gathering is not enough.

4C.4 Resources

What are the resources needed to achieve the change that is envisioned?

Top of the list is cultivating an openness to change in the first place.

There were a number of suggestions around the category of changing structures. Highest on the list for Pastoral Ministers was the need to

enable people to take on local responsibilities, recognising the limitations that people can put on themselves:

local participation local using the gifts of people who are the church I think for Ministers to find ways of encouraging people locally because some people won't go to Synod events or possibly won't even go to area events (SM5)

An honest appraisal of some churches nearer their end was called for, but so too was a pastoral approach that allowed for a time of grief, with a kind of 'hospice' care:

Walter Brueggemann makes an important point when he says that the first thing to do is to grieve for the past to recognise that for many of us the days of junior church large junior churches and sister large ladies meetings and sisterhood have gone to grieve for it and to accept it because only once we do that only once we stop looking back and saying 'well if only we could do that we could go back to there and yea history would repeat itself we can't really move forward (SM3)

Challenging the structures of the denomination was called for in a variety of guises, including the rethinking of deployment strategies, a radical transformation of the training of ministers and a new approach to the closure of churches.

I know the steps that need to be taken we need to be ruthless and close down some of these little churches but but the URC is hamstrung in that it can't mm and then we've got to be really radical you know let's really think off the wall the URC trains up 10 20 Ministers who are I mean I haven't thought this through this is coming completely off the top of me head let's say flying Ministers for want of a better word so they can go in to an area the URC will buy them a house there so they move into an area and they and they start a Christian presence for let's say 5 years and then at the end of that 5 years you know or 7 years or whatever we do a review

but I think one of the things we're going to have to do is have a real real big think of what we're training Ministers for (LM1)

With such structural clutter out of the way, other resources, in the form of better relationships would be able to move the church into a new phase of being. These better relationships are within congregations, between congregations and denominations and with the wider community:

I think one as a fellowship it would be good if we actually did things together outside of the church service if I could get them to do that so that they're actually meeting together in fellowship somewhere where we're all nurtured together (LM3)

however now I miss them (District Councils) because what they did do was give you a locus for local prayer fellowship and information and we don't have that any more and it's almost impossible for me to find out what's going on in local churches beyond the ones that I happen to have a personal link with and that's a shame but I'm not suggesting we reinstate District Councils (laughs) (HC1)

A growth in spirituality was recognised as an essential resource by some, although only one Pastoral Minister.

you know we're spiritual beings that's what we've got on offer isn't it and we so often don't convey that although the spirituality's there we don't convey it do we (GO1)

Despite it having been adopted by other sectors of society, it is spirituality that marks the Church as different from, say other parts of the voluntary and not-for-profit sector and yet is often the aspect that the Church is most reticent about.

4C.5 Concluding remarks

The United Reformed Church is in the middle of a time of crisis. It is not alone. The decline of the traditional denominations, characterised by falling and ageing membership, the growth of multi-church pastorates and

crumbling buildings is accompanied by a spread of theologies, with the liberal wing often paralysed by shyness in the face of more confident evangelicals. Yet the ministers who took part in this study, though realistic about the difficulties and stressed by the challenges of contemporary church life and definitely not naïve about what is needed to move into the Church's next age, still present a vibrant picture of ministry and mission happening and express hope that the necessary resources will be released. The underlying collective theology implied by these conversations is in line with a way of thinking about church that has been making its voice heard for a while now. John Drane references Fukuyama, when he talks about how the church has become distanced from prevailing social attitudes (Drane 2000, p23). Fukuyama's thesis is that Western society is entering a new information age, in which freedom and choice are able to grow (Fukuyama 1999), but Drane goes so far as to claim that academics, and particularly theologians, have been 'strangely resistant' to the new social reality. He has based his own reflections on Don Browning's *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, published in 1990. These societal changes are reflected in the move away from membership commitments, experienced by the uniformed organisations and political parties, amongst others, as well as the church. This reflects the post-modern rejection of a meta-narrative. As one institution that has its own meta-narrative – the Gospel – it is easy to see how Drane's observation of resistance to change comes about.

In response Pete Ward identifies 'solid' and 'liquid' churches as reflecting the way in which contemporary society does or does not relate to

traditional church (Ward 2002). Solid church is characterised by a focus on attendance at Sunday worship, wanting to suit everyone, having a club-like approach to membership and seeing size as important. By contrast, liquid church, as the name implies, is more fluid. It is founded on networks and communication, is more diverse or niche in its gatherings and events, is entrepreneurial in offering a range of opportunities for connection, has fuzzy edges and prioritises believing over belonging. Ward does state that his dream of a liquid church is not of a future where 'anything goes'. He does have views on, for example, the marks of a true church. Writing from within the Reformed tradition, he relies on Barth for his definitions:

Like Calvin, Barth identifies the mark of the true church as being the right preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. (Ward 2002, p68)

It is the word 'right' that is problematic. In these networks and gatherings of the imagined liquid church, where does authority lie without some kind of underlying solid structure? I am reminded of the reaction when there was a call for the URC to move 'from maintenance to mission'. Ministers and members alike felt their work was being dismissed, but also pointed out that without the maintenance, there would be no resources for mission. Similarly, in responses to the Patterns of Ministry report in 1995 there was criticism for too sharp a distinction between church and world. In response the authors of the report acknowledged the interdependence of the gathered and scattered communities of the church. (General Assembly book of reports 1995, p143)

The ministers interviewed for this research expressed frustration with the rigidity and bureaucracy of the too solid Church. They often spoke of

gatherings other than Sunday worship as being a strength of current ministry practice and looked for a more fluid or relaxed approach to church. On the other hand, worship, teaching, enabling people were also strengths of ministry and in looking at the resources needed for transformation, it was change in the structures, and not doing away with them, that was commended. Balance between maintenance and mission, solid and liquid church was what was thought to be required.

4C.6 Summary

The Strengths of current ministry practice have been identified as: activities that enable the growing of faith, especially worship; community building, particularly through pastoral care and hospitality; good stewardship; a clear sense of vocation. Opportunities for change were more diversely identified: remaking the church as a less rigid more flexible structure; becoming less insular; trying a more creative approach to ministry, taking risks and experimenting more. Aspirations include making ministry more collaborative, contextual, creative, celebratory. The Resources required depend fundamentally on an openness to change in the first place and honesty about what is no longer working and a reliance on the Spirit.

These are the thoughts, issues and concerns, that will be taken into dialogue with those thoughts issues and concerns that emerged from the written sources in Chapter Two. In the following chapter, I will set the two alongside each other to see if it is possible to discern common ground

between the more official or *normative* voices of the Councils of the church and the *operant* voices of ministry on the ground.

approach

5.1 Preamble

Thus far two different sources have been examined. To begin with a form of literature review was carried out with the intention of setting the context for further study. Accordingly, the history of Reformed ministry was traced, including discussions during the formation of the United Reformed Church. Following statements on current ministry practice, I highlighted the issues raised in General Assembly and Mission Council, both in presented reports and in debates on resolutions. A number of sources of statistics on ministry and membership over the years were added, as were some of the articles and letters in *Reform* magazine. These sources, all written, were generally defined as *formal* or at the very least *normative* voices, though some comments in debate or correspondence could be called *espoused*. As a whole, though, they might be categorised as the official view.

The second source was verbal and represented the views and reflections of practising ministers, expressed during two separate exercises – paired conversations and Contextual Bible Study – in two Synods. These were further amplified by discussions at ministers’ gatherings and by correspondence with practitioners in other Synods. These are the *operant* voices, with some *espoused* voices included in collective meetings and correspondence. I have categorised them as the local view. I want to

emphasise at this point, that in referring to the two sources as local and official, I imply no hierarchy of importance, no weighting of significance. Dealing with this data is the task of this chapter.

5.2 Not a simple comparison

This is the point at which we must set two sets of issues about ministry alongside each other and carry out a 'compare and contrast' exercise, in order that some kind of conclusion can be reached. The first set of issues is derived from the official documents of the United Reformed Church, reports to and records of debates of the General Assembly and other papers and comments coming from the officers and leadership of the URC. This might reasonably be considered the *normative*, or seeking to be *normative*, or official voice. Set in dialogue with these issues is the set derived from an ethnographic study of ministry in one Synod, Contextual Bible Study groups in another Synod and informal correspondence with training officers in other Synods. Here is a mixture of *espoused* and *operant* voices – people speaking for themselves about the ministry they are practising and observing.

The former collection of writings and reports are aimed at creating a strategic picture or plan; one that can be applied across the whole denomination. On the other hand, the latter data is very local and reflective, and though it can often be replicated in other parts of the denomination, it is fairly context-bound, in that people are reflecting on their own experience and observation, which is personal and particular.

It would, however, be wrong to put these two sets of issues entirely on different sides of a fence. It is not quite that black and white. Official documents and reports to General Assembly are the products of task groups and committees and these bodies are made up of a mixture of church officers, members of the Church House staff, together with serving Ministers of Word and Sacrament and elders and other church members. Even those now in leadership positions as moderators and those ordained members of staff began their ministry in a pastorate and are, in addition, now members of local churches. General Assembly, and to a lesser extent Mission Council, is overwhelmingly made up of Ministers and members of local congregations, as are Synod meetings. Conversely, some of the participants in the in the ethnographic study and the Bible study groups also serve on Synod and central committees and some are involved in the leadership structures of the URC.

Where there is a difference is that issues arising from the 'official' documents are coming predominantly from the end of a process. There are some interim reports and the final reports contain references to comments made during the consultation period, and the reports do lay bare some of their 'working out' thinking, but by and large what we have is the end product. By contrast issues arising from the data collection for this work are from the time of work in process and are from more spontaneous, less deliberated conversations and not produced for an audience, as reports to General Assembly, for example, are. They are also from settings in which speakers are guaranteed anonymity, so far as is possible, where the writers of reports and task groups are named and

known. This may make the interviews more frank but should not necessarily imply any lack of honest commitment in the official reports. All of which points to a need to differentiate between shades of grey, rather than stark black and white, to look for areas of widespread agreement and for the points of difference, to see if there is some way of finding a consensual way forward.

5.3 Points of agreement

Despite such differences in context, approach and audience and perhaps because of the overlap in personnel and experience, there are some points of agreement: issues where the official and more local issues, for want of better definitions, concerning ministry come together.

5.3.1 A desire for change

The frequency with which ministry, in all its shapes, forms and conditions, is the subject of debate in the Councils of the United Reformed Church, is evidence in itself of a felt need for change. Apart from the major reports – *Patterns of Ministry* in 1994 and *Equipping the Saints* in 2004 – in the last ten years at least, there has not been a General Assembly that did not have a resolution on ministry to debate. The agendas of intervening Mission Councils indicate a similar pattern.⁴⁷

In addition, the reports to General Assembly and Mission Council do not just come from the Ministries Committee, but also from Education and Learning Committee and from the Faith and Order Committee. This

⁴⁷ Reports and records for Mission Council and General Assembly meetings for the past 10 years are available at <https://urc.org.uk/clergy-and-office-holders/assembly-council-and-committees.html>

indicates that there are concerns not just about the role and deployment of stipendiary Ministers of Word and Sacrament, but also around the education and support of all ministers – Ministers of Word and Sacrament, Church Related Community Workers, lay preachers, elders, local church leaders – as well as ecclesiological concerns and matters relating to the structures and foundations of the URC.

The Moderators' Meeting, whilst not a decision-making Council of the Church, nevertheless has a leadership function and has responsibility for the deployment of Stipendiary Ministers and CRCWs across the denomination. Their input, through membership of Assembly Committees or attendance at the various Councils is significant as, more than most they are able to hold a bigger picture of ministry than most, at least of the Synod in which they serve. Their reports to General Assembly speak of the need for change.

In 2014 the report is headed by a quotation from T S Eliot's *Little Gidding*:

For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.
(General Assembly book of reports 2014, p70)

With subheadings such as *Changing landscape, The spectrum of ministries, Discerning times and seasons*, the Moderators address the changing context in which the Church, indeed all society, is living and also the role of oversight ministry, such as theirs.

The 2016 report tackled the identity of the United Reformed Church as the 500th anniversary of Luther posting his 95 theses approached (General Assembly book of reports 2016, p 41). 2018 marked a more overt return to

the theme of 'change' with a report entitled *Giving up and taking up*, addressed specifically to local congregations (General Assembly book of reports 2018, p71). Ministry was not the main focus, but responding to decline in churches was, the aim being not to depress, but to inspire and encourage.

The synodical input to the Westminster College⁴⁸ conference demonstrated the differences between these regional pictures and the expressed need for a way in which to harmonise the *normative* voice of General Assembly resolutions with the *espoused* views coming from local churches. At the conference the opening theological reflection pointed out the primary need – to find some way to move the 'pastoral cycle' exploration of ministry beyond reflection to response.

Asked to name opportunities for change, participants in the ethnographic study found no difficulty in coming up with a number of areas in which they would want to see movement (Chapter 4A, section 4). They named ecclesiology, nostalgia, changes in society, demographics as raising difficulties in current practice.

Although linked to the desire for change, ecclesiology was one of the points, indeed the main one, that differentiated the two groups, official and local, in their responses. On the other hand nostalgia, linked very much to the rapid changes in society, and the demographic changes in congregations, were recognised across the board as impacting on change in both positive and negative ways. Positively they fed a sense of unease

⁴⁸ Information from handouts and recorded minutes of the conference

with the current situation and a desire for urgency in some people.

Negatively they could lead to resistance – a digging in of heels with cries of ‘but we’ve always done it this way’ (Chapter 4A, section 4.1, SM5).

5.3.1a Resisting change

A resistance to change that both frustrates and paralyses is very often the underside of desire for change, or a backlash when change is introduced.

The church is not alone at being caught between past and future ways of being. For example, on-line shoppers will still rail against the closure of high street stores and the same can be said about banking. We want the benefits of modern technology and enjoy the convenience of retail and managing our money online, but dislike the almost inevitable outcome when shops and banks are overtaken by fast-food outlets, estate agents and charity shops. The pace of change in the past decades has been relentless, accelerated by the developments in digital technology and holding on to older ways in church is one way of applying the brakes and finding some relief when it seems other certainties are being swept away.

One example of this would be the use of language. We do not use the English of Shakespeare in everyday conversation, business transactions or consultations with medical professionals and yet there is a resistance in many churches to updating the words of the Lord’s Prayer and hymns in archaic wording are regularly sung⁴⁹.

This tension is explained by David Martin as being rooted in congregations being very familiar with such language:

⁴⁹ a good example of this would be *thus spake the seraph and forthwith appeared a shining throng . . .* (Verse 5 of the popular carol *While shepherds watched their flocks by night*, paraphrased by Nahum Tate 1652-1715)

A major problem with the language of Christianity is its over-familiarity to some and remoteness to most. What you use constantly lies too close of appraisal and what you rarely, if ever, encounter, consists of fragments detached from grammar and context, discrete 'beliefs' to be tested for plausibility at the bar of common sense and prejudice. (Martin 2002, p5)

Similarly grandparents who speak to their families on the other side of the world through Skype often object to the use of technology – digital projection, recorded material, etc – in church services.

Interviewees cited frustration with the continuation of outmoded styles of Sunday School, styles and times of worship that seem stuck in the first half of the twentieth century, of social attitudes that verge on the hypocritical – those family relationships that are condemned in church but accepted at home (Chapter 4A, section 6.2, NSM2).

Clinging to the certainties of the past in times of rapid social change and the concomitant uncertainty it raises, is an understandable human reaction. How to respond and deal with the underlying fears and anxieties is a delicate task needing urgent attention.

5.3.1b Desire for change – cause and effect

The desire for change, identified in many corners of the Church, has inevitably both causes and effects. The causes are to some extent fairly obvious – falling membership rolls leading to fewer ordained ministers, an ageing membership, too many buildings, and those in need of repair. A retired minister already referred to analyses annually the figures in each succeeding yearbook. In a paper written in 2017 he states:

If the decline in membership continues at the current level, this will lead to a Church in 2026 of approximately 37,000 members and, something like 25,000, in 2036. If however the rate of decline continues to increase, by

2036 we are likely to be a church of 15,000-20,000 members. It would be wise to plan on that assumption.⁵⁰

In every piece of writing on membership, there is an assumption of continued decline. This may or may not be the correct analysis, but it does contribute to a very real sense of failure by serving ministers, and church members, leading to depression, without really offering any kind of hopeful future.

It is worth noting, however, that membership figures are not the only indicator of the health of a congregation. Many have people connected to and active in the congregation who have no wish to become members formally. Technically they are labelled 'adherents', but their presence is not counted, even if they give more in time, experience and money, than those who are recorded. There are parallels in other aspects of society, where commitment is shied away from. Uniformed organisations, the voluntary sector, social and some political groups all have similar stories to tell⁵¹.

A briefing paper for the House of Commons⁵² demonstrates a historic fall in membership of the main parties until 2016, the year of the referendum on membership of the European Union, when numbers rose slightly. A jump in membership of the Labour Party is indicated at the time of the leadership election in 2014. These rises, minor and more dramatic, can be explained by the circumstances at the time, when membership became

⁵⁰ *The Future of the URC*, written and published by Martin Camroux

⁵¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/23/unions-clubs-churches-joining-something-might-be-the-best-act-of-resistance> [accessed 25.05.2019]

⁵² Number SN05125, 3 September 2018; Membership of UK Political Parties, by Lukas Audickas, Noel Dempsey, Richard Keen [accessed online 25.05.2019]

more significant and a way of demonstrating and gaining personal effectiveness.

More social movement, with work and family commitments moving people around the country contributes to the more general phenomenon of declining membership and the Church is not immune. Statistics can also over-generalise and disguise the fact that while some, perhaps most, local churches are declining in size, that is not true of all. There are churches that are growing or holding their own all over the URC, just as there are small churches that have always been small.

An ageing membership, almost inevitable if there is no growth, is also cited as reason for needing change. This can be one of the causes of the nostalgic resistance to change, but older people are not always the most conservative in their views. However, if the average age of a congregation is over retirement age, then it can be hard to get over the sense that the life of the church, at least locally, is finite. Compounding this is the tendency in many churches for officers to continue in post for many years. It is not unusual for church secretary to retire in their 80s after 30 years' service, with the consequence that any potential candidate for the post feels they are looking at a 'life sentence'. An elders meeting that has remained fairly static for a couple of decades has also the tendency for ways of working and approach to church life remaining unchanged too. Again there is the need to remember that not all churches are operating in this way and there are many younger elders and churches who try to change officers regularly.

Older buildings are a challenge and expensive to maintain, never mind upgrade. When those buildings are listed, then the added complications of ensuring legal compliance add both to the cost and the paperwork. It can be hard to renew church life in a building that was built for mid-Victorian church life with pews, outdated heating system, inadequate kitchen and toilet facilities. The result of two dozen people worshipping in a cold church designed for 300 is a depressing experience but closing a church building – one answer to the problem – can also cause depression, as members feel they have failed their predecessors. There are sensitive solutions to building problems, but it must be admitted that the ‘triple whammy’ of crumbling building, decreased and older membership needs real care and attention to the emotions of those involved.

Just as important too are the frustrations with church polity and with some of the traditions from both before and after the foundation of the United Reformed Church (Chapter 4A, 4.1). These are the areas where the differences emerge and will be considered in the next section.

The slow response to the need for change results in a collective sense of depression in the face of evident decline and work-related stress, leading to illness and mental health problems, amongst ministers, particularly stipendiary Ministers of Word and Sacrament. Stress in Ministers is not new and it is true that denominations are more aware and keen to address difficult situations and offer supportive resources. A survey carried out on behalf of the URC in 2015 by an outside organisation⁵³ had a 62% response

⁵³ Executive summary - https://urc.org.uk/images/Discipleship/Ministries2015/ManagingMinsPressure/Powerpoint_URC_1_final.pdf (accessed 26 January 2019)

rate and concluded that URC stipendiary ministers were no more stressed than people in other occupations, but that overall view hides some worrying statistics. 202 respondents were stressed in multiple domains. Only 79 were 'bored' or 'comfortable'. All the others were 'stretched', 'strained' or 'overwhelmed'. More than half were depressed and roughly one sixth were 'emotionally exhausted'. Significant stressors were the general demands of ministry. Church finances were mentioned as a factor, though the fact that Stipendiary Ministers were more likely to be feeling stress than non-stipendiary and housing issues also an issue, suggests that personal finance was also causing concern to many.

The 40-49 age group was more likely to be stressed. With the current retirement age of 68, ministers in this age bracket reading Camroux's projection of decreasing membership rates might well wonder if the URC will last to the end of their working days – and if not, where does that leave them?

Respondents were offered a personal response with generated suggestions of how to manage some aspects of stress and ministers able to talk about their levels of stress and anxiety do have access to a specialised counselling service and other resources. However the reluctance of many people to talk about mental health problems, even to a doctor, means that any figures on stress levels in ministry are vague at best and generally underestimate the true picture.

5.3.2 Team work

Collaborative ministry, or team work, was another place of agreement.

Each successive report has recommended the exploration of team-working, whether those teams be simply of URC Ministers of Word and Sacrament, ecumenical teams or teams of both lay and ordained ministers (Chapter 4A, section 8, LP1).

Amongst interviewees it was the lay participants who were more likely to see team ministry and working together as either effective ministry or as a resource for change. This may stem from a frustration that their skills and experience are not being properly used, though this was not explored at the time. Another suspicion might be that lay team members were a means of getting ministry 'on the cheap' in times of financial scarcity, though again there is no real evidence for this.

However, the *Patterns of Ministry* report from 1994 promotes the collaboration of a range of ministries, ordained and lay, and came at a time with greater resources of members, Ministers of Word and Sacrament and finance than today. This leads to the conclusion that collaborative working in teams is desirable in itself and not just as means to save money or make the best of diminishing resources. More concerning is that team ministry seems to need to be advocated regularly and has not in the quarter century since *Patterns of Ministry* was published yet become the norm.

What makes good team work effective is where each member of the team is clear of their role, of the skills and experience that they are being called to share. It cannot be assumed that simply putting a group of people together creates a team. The vacancy list, circulated with URC Ministers'

pay slips, occasionally lists ‘2 Ministers, 1 vacancy’, or similar, without specifying further and unless the profile outlines the actual gifts the pastorate is looking for, then a ‘team’, in the best sense of the word, is not being built. R Meredith Belbin is one of the acknowledged authorities on teams in industry and he defines a team thus:

A team is not a bunch of people with job titles, but a congregation of individuals, each of whom has a role which is understood by other members. (Belbin 1993, back cover)

5.3.3 The role(s) of ministry

A third area of agreement is on the role, or roles, of ministry. The role descriptions quoted from the different colleges and the Education and Learning Committee apply specifically to Ministers of Word and Sacrament. However set alongside the signs of ‘effective ministry’ asked for in the field study, where ministry was defined in much broader terms, there is much correlation.

Education & Learning Committee (2016) A minister of Word & Sacraments is a person who is:	South Western Synod fieldwork What is effective ministry where you are?
A faithful disciple	Stewardship and generosity
A theologian	
A worshipper and worship leader	Worship
A pastor	Pastoral care, Openness/presence, Listening
An educator	Teaching, Enabling
A missionary and evangelist	Youth work
A collaborator and community builder	Working together, Relationships, Hospitality

A public figure	Context
A communicator	Communication

These role descriptions could well form the basis for the team roles referred to by Belbin (Belbin 1993, p22).

5.3.4 Other points of convergence

Local church leaders, in one form or another, have been proposed in every major report on ministry. *Patterns of Ministry* recommended 'Moderating Elders', which were rejected. *Equipping the Saints* called for more Local Church Leaders, which were approved by General Assembly in 1998, but existed in only a handful of Synods. Mission Council is currently looking into the concept of locally ordained ministers as one model of non-stipendiary ministry. Some Synods have drawn up their own criteria for selection, terms of office and support.

A need for local leadership was evident in the responses from interviewees. In some cases this was as much a nostalgia for the days when each church had its own Minister, not shared with one or more other churches, as anything else (Chapter 4C, section 2, LM2 et al). In other cases, however, it was a more creative approach to the situation where one Minister was expected to offer leadership to anything up to five churches. At a very basic level that means that, unless said Minister is overworked Sunday by Sunday, they are unlikely to meet with each congregation even every month. Local leadership means that local matters can be dealt with as they arise, rather than waiting for the next visit.

Despite the resistance to placing 'maintenance' and 'mission' in competition with each other, as will be discussed later, there is a

recognition of the need for the church to be mission oriented (Chapter 4A, section 3.2, RM1) This was the stated drive behind *Patterns of Ministry* and raised as an opportunity for change by most of the ministers interviewed and in the Contextual Bible Studies.

5.4 Dissonance

If there is general agreement that change is desirable, even needed, and that the roles of ministry are commonly understood and, further, that working collaboratively in teams is the way forward, it is perhaps in the dissonances between official and local voices that the blockage towards future progress occurs.

The main areas of disagreement are ecclesiology, ecumenism and the balance between maintenance and mission. There are other areas that were raised in one group and not the other. The official documents differentiate between ordained and lay ministries in a way that the interviewees did not. Conversely the Contextual Bible Study group talked seriously about the importance of vocation, while the official papers mention it hardly at all. One final area, not of disagreement as such, but appearing only in one place, is spirituality and its place in debates around ministry.

5.4.1 Ecclesiology

The way the United Reformed Church works is rooted in its founding denominations – the Congregational Churches, the Presbyterian Church in England and the Churches of Christ. All Reformed in their way, they were

nevertheless different in many ways. The unions of 1972, 1986 and 2000 all sought to find consensual ways of merging the differing ecclesiologies. Congregational deacons were not ordained and never authorised to preside at the sacraments. There could be a tendency to clericalism, but those local churches too small to afford to call a Minister still seemed to manage and made all decisions together at the church meeting.

Presbyterian elders were ordained and there were also deacons to look after the fabric of the church. Churches grouped in presbyteries supported each other, particularly with resources, sharing Ministers where needed.

The Churches of Christ had ordained elders, some of whom were Presiding Elders. Itinerant Ministers were trained as evangelists. Some Presiding Elders became non-stipendiary Ministers at the union.

From the Congregationalist tradition the URC adopted the conciliar model of church government. There are now three decision-making councils – church meeting, Synod meeting and General Assembly, which delegates its authority to Mission Council in between meetings. From the Presbyterian tradition came the mutual support that is given expression in the aim of offering ordained ministry to every congregation. The Churches of Christ brought the importance of lay leadership in the Elders. This is admittedly a simplistic overview, but it touches on the elements of URC ecclesiology that affects the practice of ministry.

All of this seems fairly reasonable, so it is not clear how it can be problematic, until it is looked at in practice. Because each Council is authoritative in its own sphere, General Assembly is not able to instruct or

dictate⁵⁴, but only urge, even strongly urge, because the local church meeting will ultimately make its own decisions. The use of the word 'normally' in resolutions is often joked about and each local congregation considers itself unique and therefore potentially an exception to any rule. For the most part things run smoothly, but it is apparent that any attempt to create a meta-church strategy is fraught with potential setbacks. However with such apparent freedom to make decisions, it is remarkable that a number of interviewees thought the Church too rigid in its structure (Chapter 4A, section 4.1, LM1). A number of the recorded comments in the debate on 'Challenge to the Church' in 2008, which recommended more team-working, could be paraphrased with the expression 'yes, but that wouldn't work where we are'. Looked at from the point of view of the task groups and committees who produce the reports and propose the resolutions, there can be a feeling that they have done what they feel to be a good piece of work and have a clear vision for the Church, only to have it agreed, and at least nominally become *normative*, and then for the most part ignored and not *espoused*.

There is locally, from among my participants, also a frustration with what is perceived as too many initiatives:

General agreement that Church House
seeing an initiative through to its conclusion
before starting another one would be appreciated.
(GM1)

I know there's a certain glazing over of eyes
when they think 'oh there's something else we've

⁵⁴ A first exception to this was 2012 General Assembly's agreement that there may be occasion to declare certain post-ordination training to be mandatory for all active ministers. The first topic for this mandatory training was on boundaries, known as Safer Sacred Space, agreed by Mission Council in 2014.

got to do' but in the conversations um
because it comes as a formal thing (NSM3)

Training proposals are often thought rather heavy-handed, not because training and education are undervalued, but because it can feel like a lack of trust or confidence in someone's prior knowledge and experience, not to mention innate gifts. In particular, this was referred to when the idea of recruiting and training designated evangelists was discussed (Chapter 4A, section 4.1, HC2) and the original training course for elders authorised to preside at the sacraments seemed rather excessive. This is contrasted by the situation where a local church can invite anyone they like to lead worship or preach, whether trained or not.

'Bureaucracy' is often resented, though this is very often not the requirement of the URC but the increasing compliance that is required by law. The safeguarding of children is recognised as necessary, though the completion of Disclosure and Barring Service forms is often cited as a reason for the difficulty in getting volunteers to work with children and young people. Food hygiene regulations, the General Data Protection Regulations, together with all the other policies that churches are now required to have all add to the burden of church leaders, particularly those working with small elderly congregations.

District Councils, one of the original decision-making councils of the URC, were disbanded in 2007, removing one level of 'bureaucracy'. At the time, this was a welcome move, but the subsequent distancing of the local church meeting from the next 'layer' at Synod has had the effect of isolating many congregations. Minutes of Synod meetings indicates that a

minority of churches send representatives⁵⁵. Most Synods have tried to find ways of connecting churches in a geographical area, with mixed success. The result has been that many churches do not know each other well enough any more, making the idea of larger pastorates difficult to introduce and manage.

5.4.2 Ecumenism

Ecumenism is an underlying value of the United Reformed Church ecclesiology. Born of the union of denominations and with the hopes that the movement towards union would continue until all were included, being an active part of the ecumenical movement is part of the DNA of the URC. Some years ago it was agreed that at the top of every agenda of every council would be the question – ‘What are the ecumenical implications of this agenda?’

In a number of ways, this has come to be felt as a burden or a restriction on activity locally. Across the United Kingdom local ecumenism is struggling. Denominations are creating ever larger pastorates, circuits, mission areas or partnerships in order to portion out stipendiary Ministry to larger and larger groups of churches. This leaves little space or energy for local ecumenical work. There is also a noticeable breakdown in relationships when evangelical churches of different denominations get together on initiatives, leaving more liberal churches out on the sidelines.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ In March 2019, 30 church reps attended the meeting of the National Synod of Wales, out of a possible 92. In October 2018, 21 church reps attended (source: Minutes of Synod meetings available at www.urcwales.org.uk)

Figures for Southwestern Synod – 36 church reps out of 100 possible in March 2019 and 44 in October 2018 (source: Minutes of Synod meetings available at www.urcsouthwest.org.uk)

⁵⁶ based on anecdotal evidence from Taunton and Bath

Waiting for ecumenical partners before starting something new can mean missing the boat and less ecumenically-inclined denominations just getting on with things, as happened on a new building estate (Chapter 4A, section 4.1, LM1). While some churches spent time working on a united church plan proposal, another church just put someone into a house to grow a new Christian community.

Where they work well, ecumenical relationships are truly valued, but it has become harder to find new partners locally for these different reasons. In those places where there are established United Districts⁵⁷ or County arrangements⁵⁸, or where there are relatively high number of Local Ecumenical Partnerships in an area⁵⁹, denominational partners need to be considered and consulted on questions of deployment.

5.4.3 Maintenance and mission

The final *Patterns of Ministry* report to General Assembly in 1995 contained a review of the responses they had had to the Interim Report of 1994. One of these concerned the Report's perceived distinction between church and world. In its response the Task Group accepted the comment, but wrote that they found it helpful to think of the church in the two modes of 'gathered' and 'scattered'.⁶⁰

Similarly the 2004 *Equipping the Saints* report made much of the two spheres of ministry categorised by the terms 'maintenance' and 'mission'.

⁵⁷ These are created with the Methodist Church in some parts of the country, usually with a mixture of Methodist, URC and Meth/URC Local Ecumenical Partnerships served by both Methodist and URC stipendiary ministers.

⁵⁸ Both Cumbria and Cornwall have ecumenical covenants, the Cumbria partnership being more developed.

⁵⁹ For example, the North Wales Region of the Synod of Wales has 3 significant LEPs with the Presbyterian Church of Wales

⁶⁰ General Assembly 1995 Book of reports, p143

The mantra that emphasis should move 'from maintenance to mission' is one that can put local churches and ministers on the defensive. They argue that without maintaining the local church, not just through stewardship of the building and the finances, but also through worship and teaching and building up the local congregation, there is no body to carry out or take part in any mission.

Many of the signs of effective ministry observed by interviewees (Chapter 4C, section 1) might well come under the term 'maintenance' – worship, teaching, enabling, pastoral care, stewardship, youth work – but there was no sense that these practising ministers were inward-looking. On the contrary there was a recognition that a solid foundation in congregational life sent out a positive message of faithful life that was attractive in itself, but that there was also a need to connect with those outside the congregation and to reach out in ways that met the needs of the wider community (Chapter 4A, section 4.2, SM6)

Though it is true that keeping the local church a refuge for those who are unhappy with the current fast-changing world can make embracing change problematic, it is not helpful and often actually counter-productive to suggest that the local church is not important, which is how such comments on maintenance versus mission are often heard. The evidence from the field-work data suggests that mission, reaching out, is just as important to local churches as it is to Assembly committees.

5.4.4 Nomenclature

There seems to be quite strong resistance, at least amongst members of General Assembl, to renaming ministries. *Patterns of Ministry* proposed

changing the name of 'Lay Preachers' to 'Local Preachers' and though it was dismissed, *Equipping the Saints* made another attempt nine years later, when there was still no enthusiasm for it. Proposals for Moderating Elders (1994) and 'celebrant elders' (2014) have similarly not been taken forward. It is unclear what the object to renaming preachers might be, unless it is that 'local' might imply only local acceptance, even though this is not the case in the Methodist Church. The question of setting some elders apart from the rest of the elders meeting is a different kind of exercise than simply renaming. The concept of *primus inter pares* or 'first among equals' is usually felt to apply to the Chair of the Elders meeting, particularly to the Minister of Word and Sacrament who is also a member of the Elders meeting, and giving one or two elders an apparently elevated status goes against this self-understanding.

5.4.5 Vocation

The journey to ordination, in the United Reformed Church as in most denominations, begins with a vocation, a sense of being called into ministry.⁶¹ In the case of Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Church-Related Community Workers, this is explored quite rigorously, but rather less so, if at all, in other ministries, such as elders or lay preachers. Despite listing the different ministries in the URC, none of the official reports make reference to vocation. The Ministers' Contextual Bible Study group, on the other hand, spent an hour and a half talking about it. Taking

⁶¹ The practical stages of this journey are recounted in Appendix ?, which describes the different ministries in the United Reformed Church

the call of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1.4.10) as their starting point, chosen by one of the field-work interviewees, the group spoke of the importance of their own sense of vocation being central to their ministry. It did not just call them into ministry, but also sustained them through difficult times and directed the style of ministry they practised (Chapter 4B, section 5, CBS/M/5). The group also talked of how they were more or less able to discern vocation to ministry in others and of how to nurture an understanding of call in their congregations.

As the picture of ministry across the denomination diversifies, there needs to be more consideration of vocation across the whole field. It has always been the case that someone who feels called to chaplaincy, in whichever locus, has to go through the process of being called to a local pastorate and serving there for some time, before they can begin to serve in a chaplaincy context. This is simply because of the way ordination happens in the URC.

As stipendiary ministry changes in the way it is deployed, individual Ministers are further concerned that their initial call to ministry may be being disregarded. Ministers who feel they were called to and sustained in a pastoral ministry with a congregation, or congregations, are anxious about a future when they will be called upon to offer oversight to a wider area.

More local church leaders, or leadership roles assigned to elders, will need more emphasis on vocation to discern the right people for these roles, if they are not to become somewhat self-appointed. The assessment process of exploring a personal vocation alongside seeking out recognition from

others that they too observe a real call to serve offers a good model for all ministries.

5.4.6 Spirituality

Low down on the priorities from both sets of data, at most mentioned by a few, is the matter of spirituality. Perhaps it is felt that this is a given. We are talking about the church, after all, which is diminished if it is not spiritual. However to ignore the spiritual is to ignore that which is distinctive in the church. Alan Sell, quoted in Chapter 2, was quite emphatic on this matter. Without its spiritual core, the church is no more than a branch of social services or mental health provision. Both of these bodies offer support for people in different stages of life and increasingly mental health practitioners advocate practices such as mindfulness and meditation.

Worship is recognised as very important, it is true, and scripture is clearly a source of inspiration and support to the interviewees and Bible study group members. However, the church is becoming more bound to secular life by the legislation that requires compliance from all, which means that the management and structure and models used can become more secular by default, if caution is not deployed.

Acknowledging the place of spirituality is also a factor in being prepared to take risks. As one interview said:

and then you allow the Holy Spirit to work
and the Holy Spirit does magical things mm
because God is an amazing God and I
think you have to be prepared to be surprised
amazed and challenged by God (SM4)

5.5 Constructing a collective approach

With the same issues and debates going round and round for at least the last twenty-five years, it seems imperative to find a way of dissolving the blockage that is preventing the good and accepted work of various task groups and committees, as it is expressed in resolutions passed by General Assemblies, being translated into the lives of local churches. There are a number of areas in which there is agreement, foremost of which is that change is needed, or rather that an effective response to the changing context in which ministry is practised is needed. If the cry is not 'something new must be done', then at least it is that 'something must be done'. The door is then open for discussion on what that 'something' might be.

Statistics tell their own story, but they also disguise some realities. The reduction in the number of serving ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament is recorded each year and counting stipends makes the figure fairly accurate, but there are also retired ministers not counted there who are still serving (General Assembly Book of Reports 2018, p134) in a range of capacities – leading worship, serving on committees, acting as interim moderators, etc – and others in secular employment and still available for the support of local churches. The number of members is less accurately counted, but nevertheless does not include the number of adherents, a group which is growing. Another figure that is included in year book lists is the average attendance at worship. This is another misleading figure. Regular weekly attendance is not the pattern for every church member or adherent. Employment patterns, widespread families and other

commitments can mean the number of worshippers over a month, counting each one once, exceeds by quite a margin the average figure recorded.⁶² There are also increasing numbers of people, who only worship midweek, for a variety of reasons, who are not counted. None of which is intended to suggest that the overall picture is not a downward spiral, but averages tend to draw our eyes away from the highs and lows and each local situation may tell a different story. The figure that has not decreased at the same rate is that of local churches. The Ministries Committee report in 2016 made the following observation:

The belief that the URC doesn't have enough ministers is regularly voiced and yet the number of members per stipendiary minister is lower than ever. The fact that in most cases those members are spread across several congregations makes it feel very uncomfortable when the prevailing expectation is of a style of ministry that was common several decades ago. This, combined with the effect of the Assembly resolution in 2012, to match the cost of stipendiary ministry to the membership of the Church, really does force us to consider how we use ministers and what other leadership is available to the Church. (URC General Assembly 2016, p144)

If this is set alongside the information regarding stress in ministry, then it seems that a better way of providing ministry is needed.

We can agree on the benefits of collaborative working, creating teams of different ministers. Real team working, drawing together the different skills necessary, identifying the gifts needed in different situations is not just a way of 'spreading ministers of Word and Sacrament more thinly',

⁶² As a minister in Scotland eight years ago, I could regularly list about ten (different) people who I might have expected to see on a Sunday morning. In that church the average Sunday congregation was around 35, but the missing group meant that the potential pool of worshippers was nearer 50.

which is sometimes how the promotion of teams is seen. It also recognises and values the skills, experience and commitment of elders and other lay ministers.

We can also agree on the tasks of ministry. Although up to now, the list of tasks, or roles, has applied solely to ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament, with a similar list for Church-Related Community Workers, there is scope in sharing these tasks with a wider range of ministers, which would include elders and lay preachers, administrators and youth and family workers, as well as dedicated volunteers. If this is coupled with a broader definition of 'mission', which encompasses the spiritual life of the church and its community life as a basis from which to reach out to the local neighbourhood and beyond, endorsed by both official and local voices, then there may be more consensus on a way forward.

Challenge to the Church, presented to General Assembly in 2008, enthusiastically proposed Local Church Leaders as the way forward, but perhaps the mistake was to link this to forecasts regarding the diminishing availability of Ministers of Word and Sacrament. The report back to General Assembly in 2010 reflected disappointment that it had not been as straightforward an exercise as anticipated and that allowance of Synod variants was necessary. A longer timescale was clearly going to be necessary. However, the fieldwork data recognised the need and value of recognised local leadership. As part of a wider picture of collaborative ministry, there is potential in further work on the place of a Local Church Leader in a team working across a group of churches.

It was noted earlier that there appears to be a resistance to renaming roles and posts. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need for a new language to emerge that aids the formation of genuine teams and begins to erode some of the quasi-hierarchical notions and also avoid ambiguity. There is a real difficulty in talking about ministry in the church, without the sense being created that it is the work of ministers under discussion and that ministers are always Ministers of Word and Sacrament. The online version of the Manual actually says:

Unless otherwise expressly stated or clearly excluded by the context, the expressions 'minister', 'ministers', 'ministry' and 'ministerial' when used in the Structure shall refer to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments.

https://urc.org.uk/images/the_manual/B_The_structure_of_the_URC_18_10_17.pdf [accessed 30th January 2019]

This has a tendency to undervalue the contribution of others to the work of the church. The other area of ambiguity relates to ordination. When 'ordained ministers' are referred to again it is Ministers of Word and Sacrament that are meant. Yet elders are also ordained, despite often being grouped with 'lay ministers'. Church-Related Community Workers, despite having their vocation assessed in the same way and being trained for a similar length of time as Ministers of Word and Sacrament, are commissioned, not ordained, and their terms of service are restricted. There is a move amongst some CRCWs to rename them Church-Related Community Work Ministers, to make it clear that theirs is a vocation to

ministry. This discomfort with the words we use is symptomatic of the present crisis and words might help us find ways out of it.

With such a strong agreed basis for moving forward, what might be done to break the regularly occurring deadlock that prevents change and development at the local level? The areas of disagreement identified above focus around ecclesiology and the URC's historic commitment to ecumenism. Other barriers or factors that have been ignored are the endemic nostalgia for past times, or put more positively finding comfort in tradition, a problem with the language we make available to ourselves and the importance of vocation.

One set of views that have, for the most part, not been heard is those of the regular church attenders, whether member or adherent. It must be admitted that only one of the field-work interviewees comes into this category and when local church meetings are canvassed for their opinions, then here too is the voice of the member, but mediated back to the centre by the leadership. It is often the regular church attender that is the focus of implied, even overt, criticism when both official and local data sources speak of nostalgia, old-fashioned practices, reluctance to change. It is perhaps unsurprising that local churches speak in a disgruntled manner of 'them' dumping another initiative. There is in so many places a disconnect between the different councils of the church.

It has been said more than once that the role of the structures of the URC is to resource and support the mission of the local church, but despite its best efforts to do this, the failure to carry through initiatives and resolutions of General Assembly, together with many of the comments

recorded in response to major reports or in Assembly debates, suggest that the structures are missing something. Perhaps the statement ‘Culture eats strategy for breakfast’, usually attributed to the management consultant Peter Drucker⁶³, goes some way to explain the impasse, when by ‘culture’ we mean the stories we tell about ourselves, the established orders of business, the unspoken understandings, the local history. All of this goes to creating a resistance to ideas, recommendations or instructions that come from what is perceived as a very different context.

If we take the approach that the solution often lies in the problem, then if ecclesiology is seen as problematic, might the answer be found by revisiting the way the URC operates. The essence of the URC is as a conciliar church, where decisions are made collectively in councils. Those councils are now the local church meeting, Synod meeting and General Assembly. The Manual states:

These four⁶⁴ parts of the structure of the United Reformed Church shall have such consultative, legislative and executive functions as are hereinafter respectively assigned to each of them and each shall be recognised by members of the United Reformed Church as possessing such authority, under the Word of God and the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, as shall enable it to exercise its functions and thereby to minister in that sphere of the life of the United Reformed Church with which it is concerned.
(United Reformed Church Manual 2000, B2 1.(3))

There would seem to be here a recognition that subsidiarity, the taking of decisions at the most local level appropriate, is part of the way the URC intends to work. In 2014, the Faith and Order Committee brought to

⁶³ It is difficult to find an actual original citation of this quote

⁶⁴ The Manual has not yet been rewritten since District Councils were abandoned.

General Assembly a paper on the United Reformed Church's gift of conciliarity (General Assembly book of reports 2014, p111). The paper focussed particularly on the church meeting. They listed a range of negative comments that spoke of agendas overfilled with business, the potential for a culture of bullying and misuse of power, a tendency to downplay issues of faith and spirituality. A quote from 1944 suggests that this is not a recent concern. But the paper goes on to speak of what the church meeting might be, what it was set up to be: 'the place in which people listen for the voice of God in and through the multiplicity of different voices that speak'.

If that sense has largely been lost, then finding some cause behind this loss is key to renewal. Many of the fieldwork interviewees were critical of the rigidity and bureaucracy coming from General Assembly and there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence for 'initiative fatigue' in the local church, all of which points to a situation where the councils of the church have developed their own hierarchy, where General Assembly decides, Synod comments and the local church has to get on with it. That is a parody of the real situation, but it exemplifies the attitude of many in the local church, and if that is what is felt, it is not surprising that attendance at church meeting in no sense considered a privilege of membership.

Perhaps part of the reason for this apparent devaluing of the Church Meeting by members is tied up again with language. The concept of subsidiarity and devolution referred to previously is a good one, but one which carries in it notions of hierarchy. It is difficult to find words to talk about different arenas of decision-making and their relationship to each

other without seeming to indicate the level of authority implied. So church meetings inevitably come at the bottom of the ladder, with General Assembly at the top. Finding a new language for these relationships is essential to reviving confidence in local decisions. Getting into the habit of referring to 'wider' councils, rather than 'higher', might be a start, but it needs a concomitant change of mindset for the complete transformation of perspective.

A practical way out of this impasse was created in 2015 when a specially recalled General Assembly session delegated to local church meetings the authority to seek registration as a place for the solemnisation of marriages of same-sex couples (https://urc.org.uk/images/General-Assemblies/Assembly-2015/assembly_record_15.pdf

https://urc.org.uk/images/General-Assemblies/Assembly-2015/assembly_record_15.pdf [accessed 25.05.2019] . This was an

acknowledgement that the church was not of one mind and that the local context was the place for such decisions. To try and make an overall decision would undoubtedly have split the church, but the conciliar model was a way to go forward accepting disagreement on this issue but wishing to hold together as a model of the importance of dialogue and consensus.

It is not an easy path to follow, but it offers the hope of creating a new form of unity, born out of trust and the recognition of faith in one another. In this model of conciliar decision making, the General Assembly provides a forum for discussion, for the telling of personal stories that illuminated the issues, for offering resources that would enable the local church meeting to make an informed decision. Synod meetings offer a place for the local

churches to gather for the sharing of experience and expertise, particularly important when the local church has a small congregation. This honouring of the local context opens the way for many of the difficult issues to be resolved, even dissolved.

If church meetings are being devalued, the answer is not simply to encourage their transformation (back) into the original vision for them. It is also to pare back the decision-making and consequent handing on of decisions of the other councils and allow, and trust, the place where decisions will play out to make them. There will always be matters that need to be agreed together, particularly matters of legal compliance and agreed standards. The conciliar model, coupled with consensus decision-making, now practised in all the councils of the church to a greater or lesser degree, ensures that the greatest number of voices practicable can be heard. The functions of the different councils also allow for local churches, and Synods, to bring matters for discussion to General Assembly, which does happen, but not as often as might be.

In such a conciliar system, the church meeting might become a more lively, thoughtful place, where the life of the church is both celebrated and held to account. Sell wanted to 'revitalise' the church meeting (Sell 2014, p41) and take it back to its theocratic past, whether or not it ever was thus.

However Peel is more realistic:

What Sell's 'revitalization' agenda flags up, however, is a need to come to grips with the way in which *all* church polities are contextual, and the ongoing requirement to order the church so that it can function in a way which handles the constraints, and grasps the opportunities, of a particular time and place. (Peel 2019, p192)

Ecumenism will have a higher or lower priority depending on local relationships. There will be the possibility of local experiments with ministry within parameters and standards agreed together at General Assembly. Where a church is felt to be in its last years, then the congregation might be helped to face the necessary decisions by using some of the insights and practices of bereavement counselling, telling their stories and working through the emotions to a place of hope. As one interviewee commented:

what loving care palliative or hospice care
do you offer to the congregations that are there cos
they've been faithful all their lives (SM1)

Placing more confidence in the local church in this way is both respectful of the established ecclesiology and potentially takes away some of the tensions between different parts of the URC.

This approach to transforming ministry within the United Reformed Church, though in some respects radical in that it goes back to some of the original vision of the founders, does not imply major restructuring, but a new way of looking at the structures that are there.

Placing the spotlight on the local and carefully discerning the vocations of those called to some form of service, creating genuine teams to work collaboratively – teams of Ministers of Word and Sacrament, Church-Related Community Workers, lay preachers and worship-leaders, family and children/youth workers, administrators – with each congregation having identifiable and recognised leadership, is possible, particularly in a denomination that believes in the priesthood of all believers and encourages every member ministry.

5.6 Summary

In this chapter, two sets of data have been entered into dialogue with one another. The *formal* and *normative* voices have met with the *espoused* and *operant*, though there was always some overlap.

What emerged was a mixture of agreement and dissonance. Firstly, there was a general sense of the need for change, going back to the *Patterns of Ministry* report in 1994. Since then there have been few General Assemblies or Mission Councils that did not address issues regarding ministry. The interviewees too expressed a desire for change in a number of areas, not least in the way the structures of the Church operate. Despite this drive for change, or perhaps because of it, there was also felt to be some resistance. Team work, or collaborative ministry, was also a hope across the board, as was the role of ministry in its different manifestations. Local leadership was proposed, both in resolutions to General Assembly and in conversations, and is not unconnected to the hope for more collaborative teamwork. An orientation to mission, looking outward and serving the neighbouring community, was also a point of agreement. Voices of dissonance could be heard in the way the URC operates, its ecclesiology if not in principle, then certainly in the way it is practised. A hierarchy of views from General Assembly downwards, increasing bureaucracy and a weakening of the links between the different councils all contributed to a dissatisfaction with the status quo. There were differing views on ecumenism and the URC's place in the wider church, on the need

to change role titles and on the importance of vocation. Spirituality was not mentioned often, but when it was, it encouraged a spirit of risk-taking. It became clear that many of the issues raised, particularly by interviewees, had already been addressed in the major reports to General Assembly, *Patterns of Ministry* in 1995 and *Equipping the Saints* in 2005, as well as in other resolutions and though these had received acclaim, little change had been effected. A way of clearing the blockage that seems to prevent movement from the reflection stage of the pastoral cycle to response, would be to be more creative in the way the structure of the Church, specifically the Councils, operates. Reinventing the real importance of the church meeting and giving General Assembly a more advisory and supportive role, might provide the impetus for transforming the Church that is needed if the issues and concerns regarding ministry are to be successfully addressed.

In the next chapter, I will offer some Provocative Propositions. This is a term from Appreciative Inquiry for statements that appear to come from an imagined future, where change has occurred. They are based on real experience and include some of the steps that need to be taken to arrive in that new place. The Provocative Propositions in Chapter Six, therefore, will look to a time when the current issues of ministry have been resolved, and suggest ways in which this might happen.

6. Provocative propositions

6.1 Preamble

This stage of the research project is something of a hybrid. It comes into the Design stage of the Appreciative Inquiry process and yet has something of the final stage, Deliver or Response, about it. What follows are a series of Provocative Propositions, statements that imagine the future. Based on the considerations of the gathered data that were in the previous chapter, they are not just empty wishes or hopes, but are thought-through and evidence-based, with suggestions regarding how they are likely to become reality.

6.2 Definition

Provocative Propositions is a concept from Appreciative Inquiry that is an essential element of the Design stage. In the Pastoral Cycle this more or less equates with the beginning of the Response phase, as depicted in the methodological model. An early description or definition of Provocative Propositions is put thus:

a set of expressions or visual images (songs, skits, collages, etc.) that describe the larger vision for the organization and a written statement, called a “provocative proposition” or, if that term seems too risky, a “possibility statement” that describes this macro image/vision. (Magruder Watkins & Mohr 2001, p135)

In his account of using Appreciative Inquiry to facilitate congregational change, Mark Lau Branson lists the essentials:

Provocative Proposals . . .

1. are stated in the affirmative, as if already happening
 2. point to real desired possibilities
 3. are based on the data
 4. create new relationships, including intergenerational partnerships
 5. bridge the best of “what is” toward “what might be”
 6. require sanctified imaginations, stretching the status quo by pushing boundaries
 7. necessitate new learning
 8. challenge organizational assumptions and routines
- (Branson 2004, p 152)

They are crucial to the AI process because they embody the generative principle, naming aspirations that are actually attainable and therefore create forward movement in an organisation or church or company. Any practical outcomes are based on these Provocative Propositions, or Proposals, in the knowledge that they are founded on empirical evidence and actual experience but use imagination to take the next step.

One final set of guidelines, before embarking:

are they. . .

- Provocative – do they stretch, challenge or interrupt?
- Positive – are they written in positive terms?
- Grounded – are there examples that demonstrate the proposition as a real possibility?
- Desired – if pursued, would the organisation and the people in it connect with the proposition – would they want it?
- Written in the current tense – is it written as if it is in place now
(Rowett 2012, p77)

Rowett makes it clear that Provocative Propositions are not ‘pie in the sky’.

They should be a verbalisation of the hopes and dreams of the people; should take the expressed thoughts, both of concern and vision, and translate them into an image of what the future might look like if they were developed into reality. This reassurance is a good balance to Branson’s ‘challenge’ and ‘necessitated learning’.

Put rather simply, Provocative Propositions jump over the Delivery/final Response stage to offer a vision of how things will have worked out. This is the point at which Appreciative Inquiry moves beyond traditional problem-solving, which in most cases just results in the status quo being restored and the same things are continued, though possibly differently. Provocative Propositions imagine and trust in a future where change is possible and new ways are put in place.

The United Reformed Church, before it began its more formal adoption of Appreciative Inquiry, used a similar idea to Provocative Proposals to

envision a new approach to mission. The programme was called *Vision 2020* and was instigated in 2010 with ten statements of intent under the following headings:

- Spirituality and prayer
- Identity
- Christian Ecumenical Partnerships
- Community partnerships
- Hospitality and diversity
- Evangelism
- Church growth
- Global partnerships
- Justice and peace
- The integrity of creation

(https://urc.org.uk/what_we_do/mission/documents/10_statements_in_short_pdf_version.pdf [accessed 31 January 2019])

Each statement began with the assertion 'We will . . .' and looked forward to a church that was prayerful, confident, active ecumenically and in community, inclusive, evangelical, growing, addressing global concerns and social justice and good stewards of creation.

They followed a three-year programme called *Vision for Life* which offered a year of concentrated focus on each of the Bible, prayer and evangelism, which in turn sprung out of a wider revisioning of the URC, called *Catch the Vision*. Launched by the Mission Committee in 2010, the ten-year period was able to use a play on the 20/20 vision expression. Churches were encouraged to make pledges to work on one or more statements at a time, with further suggestions as to how they might fulfil such pledges.⁶⁵

These statements differ from Provocative Propositions in significant ways. They express hope without offering evidence that their fulfilment is possible. The report contains comment on the two-year period of

⁶⁵ The full report to General Assembly is in the *General Assembly Book of Reports 2010*, p6-29

consultation that took place beforehand, but it is not clear to what extent there was encouragement or otherwise to continue the exercise. Vision 2020 was ambitious in its scope, but its statements were couched in general optimistic terms, with which it would be difficult to disagree. In particular the statement on church growth was clearly one of hope over experience as the decline in membership at the time would have been difficult to halt. Some of the other statements have also been overtaken by events. Local ecumenism, as has already been noted, is in decline and the resources of the URC are now very stretched, making continued engagement with the world church problematical.

The report acknowledges the sense of 'initiative fatigue' felt by churches (*General Assembly book of reports 2010*, p10, section 5) and seeks to reassure by reframing itself as a framework, rather than a programme. However in 2019, when the results should be being felt in the church, the URC website search facility can find no references to Vision 2020.

The Provocative Propositions that follow are based on the data available in reports to and records of General Assembly and Mission Council, from the fieldwork conversations and Contextual Bible Study groups and on the foundational documents of the United Reformed Church in its Manual.

6.3 Provocative Propositions for ministry in the United Reformed Church in the 21st century

6.3.1 The prime locus for mission in the United Reformed Church is the local church.

What is provocative about this statement? In some sense it is a statement of the status quo. There can be no mission that is not grounded in action in a specific place. However, to take the statement seriously is also to accept that mission will have a different focus, a different approach, a different appearance depending on the context. Mission is particular; it is the Church responding to situations, needs and invitations, that it has on

its doorsteps, relating to the people who are their neighbours, in the light of its learning from Scripture. Mission is the people using their particular gifts in service.

This statement puts the focus on the Church Meeting, one of the three councils of the Church, and asks for a renewed approach to the relationship between them. At the moment the practice is most often for General Assembly to pass a resolution brought in the main by a Committee, or appointed task group, to agree to a programme, a practice or some such. This is then passed on to Synod meeting and church meetings either for concurrence, where required by the Basis of Union, or action. There is provision in the Manual for local churches to bring resolutions to Assembly, which normally happens via Synod, but this is not a regular occurrence. The effect has become something of a cascade of decision from General Assembly to Synod to local church and a perceived hierarchy of authority exists.

It is, however, possible for the Church to operate differently and it has done so recently on the subject of equal, or same-sex, marriage, as referred to in the previous chapter. Debate was carried out on the principles of equal marriage at General Assembly and Synod meetings, but the decision to register as a place of celebration was recognised as belonging to the local church meeting. As a result, some churches have become registered, others have agreed not to and for others the question has not yet been discussed. This way of working is validated by the Manual which states that each council of the church

shall be recognised by members of the United Reformed Church as possessing such authority, under the Word of God and the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, as shall enable it to exercise its functions and thereby to minister in that sphere of the life of the United Reformed Church with which it is concerned.

(URC Manual 2000, Section B 1 (3))

What makes this statement Provocative is the implication that this way of working should become the norm. Resolutions brought to General Assembly, unless they really do apply to the whole Church – constitutional amendments, agreeing standards of behaviour or guidelines for ministries

that will be recognised throughout the denomination and the wider church, compliance with the law of the land – could give explicit understanding that each local church meeting will decide for its own context, as it now does regarding the registration to celebrate same-sex marriage. It could be that General Assembly becomes more a place of information and encouragement, with suggested resolutions for local decision.

To say that the prime locus for mission is the local church is in no way intended to imply that Synods and the United Reformed Church do not have a mission to carry out, but it does mean that the mission context needs clearer definition. In the National Synods of Wales and Scotland, for example, there are national matters that call for response and at General Assembly, with ecumenical guests from the United Kingdom and the rest of the world, British and international concerns can be addressed.

Trusting local churches with their own decision making will have the subsequent effect of making each local church find and own its own identity. General Assembly does have a responsibility for clarifying and protecting the identity of the denomination as a whole, and it is right that this is done in the wider gathering, but in a post-modern world, denomination means less and less to new church-goers. A local church that knows itself is in a better position to attract others as it tells its own story rather than relying on people to know what 'United Reformed' actually means.

One further comment – a local church may decide that the best way for them to respond to the call of mission is to work with others. These others may be other nearby United Reformed Churches, ecumenical partners or even other agencies, such as local charities or non-profit making organisations. Some churches already work in this way and some are organically united Local Ecumenical Partnerships. The principle remains the same – decisions should be made locally. In this way the church both gathered and dispersed is recognised as a continuum. It is for the wider denomination, or denominations, to support and help resource and not to dictate.

6.3.2 Ministry is a collective term for all the work that enables mission

Perhaps the most important word in this statement is 'collective'. It is no longer good enough to say that the only ministers are ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament and that ministry is simply what is practised by them, as the Manual currently states⁶⁶. The effective ministry observed in the field-work was carried out by various ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament – active and retired-but-still-active, stipendiary and self-supporting, in pastorates and Synod staff posts and chaplaincies, accredited by Assembly, together with locally recognised lay preachers, local church leaders, lay ministers – Synod staff, youth worker, elders, regular church members. Each person interviewed had a role to play in the mission of the church. There are currently no active Church-Related Community Workers in the South Western Synod, but their ministry is highly valued elsewhere.

That shared ministry is what carries out the mission of the churches where they are and to speak only of Ministers of Word and Sacrament, when speaking about 'ministry', is to devalue the committed faithful contribution of so many people. To speak of ministry as the work that enables mission is to go beyond the categories of 'maintenance' and 'mission' as if they were opposing activities, but it is to recognise that the resourcing of people through worship and teaching, Bible study and prayer is the foundation of mission. This building up of the people of God is what differentiates the mission of Church from the activities of voluntary and secular bodies, often engaged in the same work. The mission of the Church is thus undergirded by values of inclusion and justice and love and freely given service and founded on faith. It is true that buildings can become a burden and can drain both the resources and the energy of local churches, but it is also true that good stewardship of buildings, and finance, can bring a concrete, practical dimension to mission, offering a welcoming place to be and in some cases a necessary refuge and resource to share.

⁶⁶ The actual wording was quoted in the previous chapter, p 178

The tasks needed to carry out those activities identified as effective ministry – worship and teaching, training, youth work, pastoral care, hospitality, listening, relationship-building, good communications, stewardship and generosity – can never be found in the gifts of one person or one type of person. The mission of the church needs teachers and preachers, listeners, carers, tea-makers, communicators, accountants, caretakers, administrators and all are in truth ministers.

A new language is needed and urgently, but it will not be easy. The Methodist Church has tried to use ‘presbyter’ as its word for Minister of Word and Sacrament, but it has not really caught on. A start could be made by more care being taken with the way issues of ministry are raised. *Challenge to the Church* begins with an account of the deployment crisis – there will be fewer Ministers of Word and Sacrament in the future – and goes on to propose a programme of creating Local Church Leaders. The sense of this, because of way the report is written, is that we need Local Church Leaders to fill the gaps that are going to be left. It might have been preferable to speak of the value of each church having its own leader – carefully selected and trained and supported, offering a point of contact for the whole community – and only then adding that this will be of benefit as the number of Ministers of Word and Sacrament decreases. Then the sense might be conveyed that Local Church Leaders are a good idea in their own right, regardless of other considerations.

The value we place on a range of ministries, coupled with the way we speak of them, may well increase the number of people coming forward to serve.

6.3.3 Each congregation has a recognised Local Church Leader

The leadership of the local church is already situated in the Elders meeting. According to the Manual, its role is to oversee the spiritual life of the church (*The Manual* URC 2000, B3). Chairing these meetings is normally the responsibility, or privilege, of the serving Minister, when there is one in pastoral charge, but in many places this role is given to one with particular

gifts of chairmanship or is shared between Elders in turn. Where there is no serving Minister, a Local Church Leader can offer great benefits, particularly where that leadership is seen as functional – there to enable the efficient working of the church – and not status-driven.

Those Synods who have developed the ministry of the Local Church Leader are already feeling the benefit. Churches feel more secure and able to make their own decisions. There is someone to provide a focus for contact in the community. Properly called, appointed and supported, Local Church Leaders help the church envisage a future and can make plans. Ministers of Word & Sacrament offer supervision, either as the pastorate Minister, or from another pastorate to a more isolated congregation.

The feeling of ‘treading water’ during a period between Ministers is eliminated. The expressions used for this period – either vacancy or interregnum – are both negative disempowering terms. ‘Vacancy’ is inaccurate – the church is still there, active and with its own local ministry and only the manse, if there is one, is empty. ‘Interregnum’ is an even more negative word and places stipendiary Ministers on a pedestal that is both anachronistic and inappropriate for those whose calling is to serve. Local Church Leaders are Elders, Lay Preachers, retired Ministers, who are identified as having the both the necessary gifts and the confidence of the church. They have a specific job description and term of office. These safeguards are necessary to avoid those unfortunate, but sadly not uncommon, situations where leadership is simply assumed or imposed. In the majority of cases such posts will be not be paid, although all expenses of office should be met, including travel, administration and training.

6.3.4 Ministry is practised in the United Reformed Church according to an agreed theological framework

An agreed theological framework is essential in this new way of resourcing the mission of the Church. Whilst it is proposed that the local church meeting is the place for its mission to be discerned and then for the necessary gifts, roles and ministries to be identified, it is important that all should have confidence in the integrity of such ministries. An agreed

framework will bring some basic standardisation to ministry and a theological approach will bring a particular identity to the work. Agreed standards throughout the denomination are essential in a society that is still very mobile. Ministers and members will move from place to place according to family and employment demands, as well as personal will, and a wholistic and denomination-wide understanding of ministry will ease the transition from church to church.

This theological framework should be contemporary, fit for purpose in the current climate. It will draw on the traditions that are foundational for the church but take into account changing social context. Bearing in mind the rate of change, it should be provisional, regularly reviewed and updated. It should be a document that can be shared with confidence, not one that needs careful explanation to get around any anachronisms. The framework should be inclusive, reflecting both the practice of Jesus and the declared statements on equal opportunities of the URC and the understanding of ministry as a collective practice. To be genuinely inclusive it should be applicable in a variety of church contexts, including chaplaincy and support ministries. Finally, it should be practical, rooted in the actual experience of ministers.

A proposed theological framework follows these Provocative Propositions.

6.3.5 Ministry is offered to, in and for each local church according to its discerned need

The present intention of the United Reformed Church is to provide ministry to every local church. That ministry is there for the local church - to build it up so that it can serve the world. Ministry is also to be offered in the local church, recognising that church members can be just as in need of the church's ministry as those outside it. The Manual has already told us what that means – the provision of the service of a Minister of Word and Sacrament. That service may be exclusive or shared with other churches or other work. In fact the URC struggles to fulfil this commitment. Pastorates are growing ever larger, meaning some congregations see 'their' minister infrequently. In order to facilitate a peripatetic model of ministry there will

inevitably be times when a church or pastorate is 'vacant'. The movement of ministers would not be possible if it were not so.

Expanding the definition of ministry to encompass other categories of minister makes the original commitment easier to meet, but there is a further factor that must be taken into consideration. If we agree that the local church is the focus, there still needs to be a broader geographical vision of ministry provision and local churches must look beyond their own needs to consider those of their regional neighbours. We must be realistic about the availability, the financing and the variable gifts of stipendiary Ministers of Word and Sacrament, Church-Related Community Workers and other paid staff. Synod Moderators, as minister to the ministers and companion to the churches, have a role to play in helping individual churches receive the resources they require.

The proposition refers to the discerned needs of the local church and there should be an understanding that the ministry offered will almost certainly be different in each case. A large church with a developing social provision and possibly a partnership with an outside agency may be best served by a full-time stipendiary Minister who can offer both spiritual leadership and a degree of management skill. They will work collaboratively with elders, lay preachers, and others, but their dedicated time and appropriate training will help the church develop according to its understanding of its mission. On the other hand, a small rural church, offering a warm welcoming fellowship and good pastoral care to the whole village may be served by a Local Church Leader – retired stipendiary Minister, non-stipendiary Minister, lay preacher or elder – who has enough time and the skills to support and encourage the ministry of all the people. There are any number of examples that can be offered. What ties them together is the theological framework and the respect each ministry has for the others.

6.3.6 Collaborative ministry teams work with groups of churches

A genuine team is a group who collectively offer ministry to a church or group of churches; who respect each other's gifts, so that each can play to their own strengths and be able to trust that other areas of mission are

well-served by other ministers. Such teams will contain ordained and lay ministers, full- and part-time ministers, paid and voluntary ministers, of different ages, races and cultures, male, female and transgender, with different abilities, different skills and experience. Some teams will work only with one church, while others will work across a group of churches. Either way, their role is to develop, encourage and support the mission of each local church.

Teams will be resourced from the Synod and beyond to develop a collaborative working practice that rejoices in and values the contributions of each team member. Churches too will be helped to see that this way of providing ministry is a gift that will move the Church beyond 'divvying up' Ministers of Work and Sacrament into a more effective and just sharing of the true variety of available resources.

When a post for a Minister is advertised, the profile will indicate the specific skill-set needed to complete the team, the opportunity for re-evaluation of needs in the current situation having been taken up. This attention to the different roles played and gifts and skills required in the team will result in ministers able to work with more confidence in their position and less anxiety about being expected to operate beyond their ability.

Despite regular calls for team-working over the years, this will still be new to most parts of the URC and care and sensitivity will be required in its unrolling.

6.3.7 Vocation is the source of all mission and every ministry

Many occupations are considered to have a vocation. Mostly the word is applied to caring professions that are not well paid – nurses, teachers – and is used as a form of compensation⁶⁷. Vocation in the Church is similar

⁶⁷ A Google search for 'vocation and income' raise the following at the top of the page:

A **vocation** is an occupation, either professional or voluntary, that is carried out more for its altruistic benefit than

in many ways. It speaks of being drawn into a certain area of service, but in the Church it is believed that it is God that is drawing, calling an individual. Ministers of Word and Sacrament have their personal vocations tested as they offer themselves as candidates for ministry. Ministers discern their vocations in various ways. Some have a vision or a sudden flash of recognition, but for many more it is a gradual process that involves listening to other people as well as meditation and prayer. At assessment the interviewing panels are trained to identify both a genuine personal vocation and a recognition of the vocation, being validated by those who know them best. The panels are trying to sort out the ones who are just giving in to the pressure of others, every bit as much as the ones who are convinced they are perfect minister material, whatever anyone else says. When a candidate is not accepted, there is a pastoral role in helping them discern what it is they are called to, if not ministry of Word and Sacrament. Church-Related Community Workers have a similar experience when they candidate and Local Church Leaders will have an interview before appointment. Most editions of *Reform*, the monthly magazine of the United Reformed Church, have a quarter-page advert that asks the question –

God – what are you calling me to?

Arrows point to Evangelist, Church-Related Community Worker, Local Church Leader, Minister of Word and Sacrament, Lay Preacher with the invitation to contact the Synod Office or Ministries ‘if you would like to explore pathways into ministry’. There has been material prepared in the past for Vocations Sunday and occasional ‘Enquiry Days’ organised to offer information on a range of ministries. These could become a more frequent and more local affair and go further than the roles listed here. *Walking the Way – living the life of Jesus today* is the name of the URC’s recent refocus on discipleship and underlying its emphasis on whole-life discipleship is the

for **income**, which might be regarded as a secondary aspect of the **vocation**, however beneficial.
(<https://www.quora.com/Whats-the-difference-between-a-profession-and-a-vocation> [accessed 27.05.2019])

question of vocation. There is a church in San Francisco that, in its welcome to new members and then on an annual basis, asks people to think about where they are called to serve in the local church. They have four different strands –

- Listening for God’s Word for us today – congregational life team
- Modelling the radially inclusive Welcome of God – spiritual care team
- Tending the Holy – facilities asset management, finance & admin team
- Being the Christ in the world – outreach/mission team⁶⁸

How transformed might the church be if vocation was recognised as the prime source for all disciples in this way?

Churches too can have a collective vocation. Some feel called to work with people who are homeless, some with older people. Some are called out of their crumbling buildings into an uncertain, sometimes nomadic future. It is through discerning this vocation that mission priorities can be identified and the resources, both practical and in ministry, that are needed to respond to the calling.

There are key moments in a church’s life - the moving on, or retirement, of an incumbent Minister of Word and Sacrament, for instance - when a reassessment of that life is needed. A realistic review of the gifts of the congregation will begin to discern the vocation of that congregation and, in doing so, point up the gifts and skills required in the new leadership.

6.3.8 There is a strong sense of the Church following the Holy Spirit and prepared to take risks

Not every change in the ministry of the church needs to be foreshadowed by a report to General Assembly, leading to a resolution, that is endorsed by Synod and church meetings and ratified by the next General Assembly.

⁶⁸ From a leaflet produced by Seventh Avenue Presbyterian Church, whose tag line is – Belong (<https://seventhavenuechurch.org/about-us/design-for-ministry/> [accessed 26.05.2019])

Sometimes a change can simply be foreshadowed by a local discussion of a current need that requires attention, if not immediately, then well before the two years necessitated by the formal route.

When Jesus sent out the disciples to practise their own ministry, he told them to go where they were welcome. If they were not welcomed, then they should simply move on (Matthew 10.14); but they were sent out to take the risk of rejection, as he did. Risk-taking is part of true discipleship and so has a part to play in ministry, which is not to say that the church should just act on a whim.

Any change or development of a church's, or individual's, ministry calls for discernment. Whether it is about meeting a new situation that has arisen or, at the other end of the scale, deciding to cease something that is no longer working, decisions call for discussion, based on evidence and reflection. The church meeting's understanding of collective discernment is a good model. The purpose is not to seek to persuade the people one way or another as a democratic exercise, but to come to a consensus about what is the right action for the church at this point. This will involve Bible study and prayer, as well as evidence and information from other sources, as the congregation listens for and to voices other than its own.

If a church feels confident that it is called to a particular action, change or conclusion, then it should be enabled to step out in faith and follow the Spirit's leading. Not every decision needs to be set in stone, but may be better served by experimentation, adapting to circumstances, improving and amending as necessary.

Stories of such churches may well form the basis for more formal and long-lasting changes that are proposed for the denomination as a whole, but the concept of Spirit-led risk-taking and experimentation should be encouraged and supported. Without it the Church is in danger of ossifying and becoming an anachronism.

6.4 A theological framework for United Reformed Church ministry in the 21st century

Avoiding the temptation to 'manage' ministry resources as one might manage the distribution network of a group of retailers requires spiritual resources to come alongside the undoubted insights of business. A theological framework can remind us of the particular nature of the service we are dealing with.

This theological framework has been formed according to the so-called 'Wesley quadrilateral' discussed in the chapter on Methodology.

Accordingly, it is based on scripture, tradition, reason and experience. It is offered for the present time and as such is intended to be contemporary, but also provisional. It has an inclusive nature because that is the essence of Gospel teaching and it is hoped it is found to be practical, being informed by the lived experience of practising ministers.

6.4.1 Scripture and ministry

Biblical texts were chosen by interviewees at the conclusion of the paired conversations. Interviewees were asked if there was a Bible text that inspired or underpinned their ministry. The collection proved to be a mixed bag, but none of the texts were concerned with Paul's three-fold ministry of *episcopo* or oversight, *presbyteros* or minister and *diaconos* or elder. Rather they were narratives that spoke of the nature of God and God's care and guidance, of good practice in ministry, of pastoral concerns for God's people, of being released and transformed for something new and being called into a working relationship with God.

The motifs that characterise the different texts are vocation, community building and inclusivity.

God calls people into ministry, according to the innate gifts of the one called, but also according to the needs of the times. That calling is in many cases a challenge: a challenge to do more than the one called thinks possible. So Jeremiah, the son of a priest, is called as a young boy at a time of crisis in the people of God (Jeremiah 1.4-10). Jacob is challenged to meet his wronged brother with a spirit of reconciliation (Genesis 32.22-31). Peter, the fisherman, is called to feed sheep (John 21.15-19).

This calling is not the end of the relationship, but it is continued in a supportive, inspiring and expectant way. God is depicted as the father of two boys expecting each to understand and live with their differences (Luke 15.11-32); the one who understands us through and through (Psalm 139), who makes of us a new creation (2 Corinthians 5.17). Jesus comes to reassure when the world is disturbing (Mark 6.47-52).

What we are called to do is to extend the kingdom of God, by building community where we are. From the smallest act (Matthew 13.31-32) to the grandest gesture (Luke 10.25-37), ministers are called to love (Mark 12.28-31) and to lead (Micah 6.6-9), to offer hospitality (Acts 16.11-15) and healing (Mark 5.1-10) as well as teaching and preaching (Ezekiel 37.1-14). There are no limits to who might be called – Jeremiah thought he was too young (Jeremiah 1.6), Abraham too old (Genesis 12.4); the reformed trickster Jacob (Genesis 33.28) and the healed demoniac (Luke 8.39) are given tasks to do; women and men have equal parts to play – the church at Philippi needs both Paul, the evangelist, and Lydia, the host, to thrive (Acts 16.12-15).

Biblically authentic ministry begins with a vocation, is nurtured and developed by God and God's people, offers new life and hope to those in need and leaves no-one excluded.

6.4.2 Tradition and ministry

The founding traditions of the United Reformed Church, the three denominations, each bring a gift to the current Church. The Congregational tradition brings the conciliar model of being church. The Presbyterians bring the gift of connection and the Churches of Christ offer an understanding of the different ministries needed.

Therefore there are church meetings, and Synod and General Assembly meetings, to discern and plan and carry out mission. No church need feel alone or isolated, because they are connected to others through the sharing of resources. The contributions of different styles of ministry, different roles and tasks are all valued with some rooted in the local church and others moving around as need is determined.

More recent traditions, if they can be called such, are the declarations that the URC has made. It is committed to ecumenism and will work alongside and together with other denominations, their churches, members and ministers, to fulfil the call of God and local needs. Into these ecumenical partnerships it brings its own particular characteristics, both denominational and local, with the confidence born of its convinced vocation.

The URC declared itself a multi-cultural church in 2005, a gathering of people ready to share stories and experiences from around the British nations and the world. Being about so much more than race or skin colour, this multi-culturalism honours the local context and validates each embodiment of the Gospel that seeks to engage with the people around in a language and style it will relate to.

In 2022 the United Reformed Church will be 50 years old, young by most of the established denominations' standards, but old enough to become settled into an identity that can be owned with confidence by its members: a church comfortable with difference, giving a share in authority to all, helping all to hear and respond to a call to ministry and working together as it works with others.

6.4.3 Reason and ministry

Reason is a mysterious element, hard to grasp or define. The myth or story of Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3.1-7) is one that explains our ability to think and make choices, judgements and decisions. For reason to be verified or justified, it should be evidence-based, reflective, capable of being defended when challenged. Though cerebral in its essence, if it is not based in living and lived reality, even where it is then creatively developed, it belongs solely in the sphere of the mind. At its best reason is an admixture of information, reflection and imagination. Without that spark of creativity, reason is simply calculation.

Reason informs ministry at many different stages. The testing of vocation is one such time, when the interview or assessment panel uses its best judgement, based on reports, references and conversation with the candidate, to discern whether or not a vocation is real. At the end of formation, church meetings gather to decide on the call of a Minister to that pastorate, based on reports, conversations, worship-leading. The church councils all make reasoned decisions on ministry – its deployment, definition, formation, support. In these cases reason is a collective exercise and when the result of such deliberations are to be felt by a group or groups, then it is well that the deliberation was also conducted in community, as the example set by the early church meeting in Jerusalem (Acts 15).

There are times when it is appropriate for one person to make a decision, particularly when it is that person who will bear the responsibility for the subsequent action or activity, but the model of consensus decision-making can be a hopeful example to the wider community.

6.4.4 Experience and ministry

Listening to practising ministers, the data-collection method of field-work, brings to the theological framework the element of experience.

Appreciative Inquiry encourages us to build on that which is good, the ministry that is seen as effective. The picture of ministry that was revealed is grounded in the mission to extend the realm of God in the place in which we find ourselves.

That mission finds expression in community building – hospitality that offers a welcome to all, that nourishes body, mind and spirit through eating together, listening to each other, caring for those in need, reaching out to the lost and the lonely. This mission is fed by the nurturing of a relationship with God, through worship and prayer, teaching and enabling and is undergirded with good stewardship and a spirit of generosity.

These actions of ministry are not exhaustive and different times and places demand different resources, but the overarching categories of growing faith, building community and good stewardship allow for contextual nuances.

6.4.5 Theology and ministry

A theology of ministry grows from scripture, the Word of God to the church. It is filtered through the traditions of the church, founded themselves in scripture, and mediated through reflective reasoning. This distillation is then further blended with experience. What emerges should be true both to its sources and to the contexts in which that theology is to be applied.

This particular theology points to a ministry that is underpinned by vocation – the vocation of the church and of the individuals that are called to carry out its mission. That vocation may call to risk-taking or the seemingly impossible but is received gratefully and is trusted in faith. This ministry is instructed by a vision and priorities discerned collectively in council, which reflect the culture or cultures in which the church is placed. The church will not feel alone but will be able to reach out to other congregations and denominations in partnership and will seek further partners in the community. The tasks of ministry and mission are to be carried out by different people, with different gifts and experiences, working collaboratively to resource the people of God, through deepening relationships with God and each other, to build community within and without the church and use wisely and generously all the resources that are available.

6.5 Summary

This chapter has provided something of a link between the analysis of Chapter Five and the conclusions to come. Provocative Propositions build on the analysis to project into the future in such a way as to show how to respond or deliver the fruits of research.

The theological framework proposed has been worked towards throughout the whole study. It has taken the Biblical insights from the paired conversations and Contextual Bible Study, the traditions, both foundational and more recent, of the United Reformed Church, the church's understanding of reason and discernment and the experience of a wide

range of practising ministers and worked them together to offer a basis for the practice of ministry now. In doing so, it has paid attention to the various voices – the *formal* voice of the theologians, the *normative* voice of Scripture and the Basis of Union, the *espoused* voice of General Assembly decisions and other reports and the *operant* voice of ministers on the ground – and attempted to produce a meaningful harmony. In the concluding chapter to follow, I will review the work and look again into the future to suggest a way to take it forwa

7. Conclusion

7.1 Preamble

It is traditional to offer a conclusion, or even conclusions plural, at the end of a piece of research, but that presupposes that the subject has come to an end and everything is resolved: there is an answer to the original question and this ends the matter. However a work based on the pastoral cycle can never be quite that finite. It has already been stated that the cycle is more of a spiral; so the last stage of the exercise becomes a new situation for the next round of research and reflection and response and so it goes on. Accordingly, this concluding chapter will hand on a set of further questions that emerge from the response to the thesis' opening question.

I will begin by recalling the journey taken to this point: a reminder of the reasons for embarking on this study in the first place, outlining the creation of an appropriate methodology, rehearsing the data findings and their analysis. The real conclusion, in the traditional sense began in Chapter Five, when all the voices were brought together and at this point a change in direction was made because it was becoming clear that there was a more urgent question than that which prompted the study in the first place. That question related to the way the church operates, which in turn impacts upon its ministry. A new theology of ministry was still needed but within a wider framework. Chapter Six began to frame that new way of working through Provocative Proposals that imagined a future church life. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the work here will come not to a final destination, but a staging post where someone else can take up the reins, but I will not finish before offering some considered thoughts that might give direction to the next cycle.

7.2 Starting out

The starting point for this project was the sense that ministry in the United Reformed Church was approaching some kind of crisis. With declining membership, the number of stipendiary Ministers of Word and Sacrament

that could be afforded by the available resources was also reduced. Because churches were not closing so quickly, many, if not most, Ministers were being required to serve a growing number of churches across ever larger geographical areas. For many Ministers, this was a real source of stress: the ministry they had trained for, both pastoral and community-focussed, was becoming difficult to sustain in these changed circumstances. A Minister might need to travel over 15 miles between congregations, spanning different Churches Together groups, constituencies, civic areas with hospital visiting even further distances. In Local Ecumenical Partnerships, the demands of the participating denominations can add further to the diary commitments. Consideration of the collated statistics and the projections in the debates on deployment all see the Church on a downward spiral, which for the practising Ministers holding the reins at the time can create a feeling of failure.

Some parts of the Church have attempted to find ways of filling the ministerial gaps, but it has very much felt that way. The Theology of Ministry that is offered to ordinands, even in 2019, does little to address the contemporary situation. It pays lip service to Ministers who work outside the local church context – academics, chaplains, support staff in Synods and Church House – but totally ignores the ministry of Church Related Community Workers, lay preachers, elders and others. Without a collective vision of collaborative ministry, accepted by all parts of the church and pursued with support and encouragement, each church and Synod is left to find its own resolution to what is becoming a crisis. The aim of this research was to create such a vision, in the form of a new theological framework, to offer to the Church.

7.3 Methodology

Addressing such a complex issue, one that deals with emotions and livelihoods, as well as fundamental beliefs and treasured traditions, necessitates a methodology that gives space for all these to find expression and be taken seriously.

This bespoke methodology, as I have named it, situates itself in the field of practical theology, blending faith and belief with practice and experience. The framework for the research was provided by bringing together the pastoral cycle and Appreciative Inquiry. The pastoral cycle has a long history as a tool for theological reflection and has been modified a number of times. This work took the model created by Emanuel Larty as its basis, because Larty provides space for movement back and forth between the different stages. Appreciative Inquiry brings a strength-based approach. Generativity is one of its core principles, coming as it does from the world of change management. That dynamic sense of direction is important in this study as it has as an underlying aim a move into a different future. Different research tools and emphases were used at the different stages of the cycle. The data collection was enabled by literature review, fieldwork from the discipline of ethnology, paired conversations from Appreciative Inquiry, and Contextual Bible Study, acknowledging that this was participant active research, given my status as an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament in the United Reformed Church. Analysis of the data took a grounded theory approach, beginning with a SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Resources) analysis – one of the Appreciative Inquiry tools – of the fieldwork, which included some focus group work as well as the on-to-one paired conversations. Bringing together the recorded data and the literature review findings in critical dialogue brought the research to the point of creating Provocative Propositions, also an Appreciative Inquire tool, to offer some considered conclusions. Throughout the work, Helen Cameron's theory of the four voices of theology – *formal, normative, espoused, operant* - have helped clarify the strengths and weaknesses of current practice and kept the research aware of who was not being listened to and who was being ignored, as well as who shouted loudest. Inevitably the practical working out of the methodology involved some changes and adaptations along the way and I have indicated some of this at the end of Chapter Three. However, any such alterations were relatively minor and work proceeded as planned.

7.4 Reviewing the data

Two sets of issues emerged from the data collection. A review of printed data – incorporating the history of the Reformation, the foundation of the URC, current statements on ministry, debates in and reports to General Assembly and Mission Council, as well as articles and letters in *Reform* - provided a formally agreed position and highlighted issues about ministry of concern to the denomination. Conversations with individual ministers in one Synod and Bible study groups with ministers in another offered a picture of ministry as it is practised and brought out the issues felt to be important on a personal level.

These two groups were not entirely discrete, but overlapped in their personnel. However the context made a difference. A Minister might be both a participant in the fieldwork paired conversations and a member of a task group offering a report to General Assembly. However in conversation, there was personal reflection on ministry practice, given within a commitment to anonymity, while membership of the task group was in the public domain and a much broader perspective was called for. What ultimately emerged I differentiated, without prejudice, as official and local.

Official issues mainly brought the *normative* voice, although the *formal* and the *espoused* voices were also heard. They articulated the official position of the denomination, based on its history and traditions. The *formal* voices of the theologians from the Reformed school underpinned and in the resolutions put to General Assembly were *espoused* hopes. The local voices were most definitely *operant*, often with the confidence of being *espoused*.

Such categorisation should not lead anyone to imagine that there was no common ground between the official and the local. There was indeed some areas of agreement as well as inevitable dissonance. Change, both a desire for it and resistance to it, was an agreed starting point, though it was taken in different directions by the two groups. The abundance of official reports and resolutions indicated a desire for change in way ministry is offered to the churches, but change in other areas was also

desired, particularly by local interviewees. They looked for change particularly in the operation of the church, with less bureaucracy and more openness to experiment. Resistance to change was evidenced by the lack of action following the official acceptance of major reports on ministry, which came with lists of recommendations, and was articulated clearly locally, citing nostalgia as a major cause.

The importance, or potential of teamwork also united the two groups, as did an understanding of what ministry was, its role in the church and in society. Local church leadership was also something that was both proposed by official channels and seen as needed by local voices. Ecclesiology and ecumenism were both areas of dissonance, but it was more complex than simple disagreement. The difference came because the *normative*, official voice claimed one thing and the local *operant* voice declared that things were not working like that. So the way the Church is structured, its ecclesiology, is laid out in the *Manual* but at the local church level, the exceptions outnumber the rest and there is a reliance on the understanding that the local church meeting has the final voice and cannot be instructed by another council of the church. Similarly with ecumenism, the denominations co-operate on a range of issues, particularly social justice, and there are number of Local Ecumenical Partnerships across the nations. However local ecumenical co-operation depends heavily on the personalities and theologies of local clergy and the need to work with other URC churches, because they share a Minister, leaves little time for working with other churches.

Once an overall picture was constructed that was faithful to the data of all kinds, what emerged was a portrait of a Church in crisis: a Church with declining membership and so struggling to provide stipendiary ministry to the local congregations with a reduced number of Ministers; a Church with an outdated theology of ministry and an ecclesiology that was used in an unhelpful way; a Church with plenty of good thinking people, producing excellent reports, but failing to carry through the recommendations it voted for. I have used the word 'crisis' intentionally. Don Browning believes that crisis is necessary for transformation:

Whatever the reason, when crisis comes, destabilization occurs. With destabilization comes a possibility for spiritual movement. (Browning 1996, p281)

7.5 More questions emerge

At the outset, the aim of this piece of work was the creation of a contemporary theological framework for ministry in the United Reformed Church. This framework would be an essential part of the answer to the question of how the Church could best, or at least better, resolve some of the issues around the provision of ministry to all congregations.

Some issues relate to historical documents or the way they have evolved over the years. Included here would be an outdated theology of ministry, that only deals with a section of the whole ministry of the church.

Connected is the impact that the foundational commitment to provide ministry to all churches has had upon the ability to share out fairly the churches resources. Linked with these two issues is the way in which the language we use for ministry and ministers is unhelpful at best and problematical at worst.

Other issues are more to do with the changing context in which the church operates. Different Synods have developed different approaches to resolving some of the problems that arise from the issues named above.

The creation of the National Synod of Scotland in 2000, which also triggered a renaming of the National Synod of Wales, acknowledged the ways in which different political, legal, educational systems impacted on the Church, as well as different ecumenical relationships with denominations that do not exist in England, except as individual 'ex-pat' congregations. The growth of regionalism in secular life has also had an effect on Synods. At the same time there has been a collapse in some aspects of ecumenism. It is true that there is still evidence of robust co-operation in certain areas – the Joint Public Interest Team, the Cumbria United Area are two strong examples. However at a local level there is not the coming together in some places that there used to be and at national

levels some of the mainstream denominations⁶⁹ are each struggling to deal with decline in their own ways.

As the research progressed it became clear that there were already good answers to the original question. These could be found in official reports, records of General Assembly and Mission Council, in conversation with ministers engaged in the field-work or Bible study groups. The answers revolved around mutual respect, genuine team work, a focus on the local context, enabling and resourcing congregations. A different question then arose – what is preventing the Church from taking up the results of so much good and dedicated work and putting them into practice?

The quest for a more contemporary theology of ministry still stands, but commitment to a grounded theory approach means that the second question needs attention as well. Addressing ways of unblocking the logjam in the pastoral cycle from reflection to response became the driving focus of the latter part of this study.

One possible solution would be to re-orient the ecclesiology of the URC and use its structures in a different way, prioritising the local church meeting and introducing subsidiarity so that decisions were made in the most appropriate place. Legally necessary compliance decisions would need to be the business of General Assembly, as would matters that were necessary to hold the Church together. I have suggested that a theological framework for ministry might be one of these matters. The URC would be locally grounded and yet still connected in significant ways, honouring both Congregational and Presbyterian roots. Connection would facilitate the sharing of resources, as it does already, which is necessitated by socio-economic differences between the nations and regions of the United Kingdom and is commended by Paul (2 Corinthians 8).

A further question, requiring serious consideration would be about the driving force behind any change. Are numbers or integrity and authenticity driver? If the URC is to eschew the pyramidal hierarchy in its reworking

⁶⁹ For example, the Church in Wales has created 'mission areas' that group parishes together, the Presbyterian Church of Wales has similar 'mission partnerships', the Methodist Church has enlarged some of its circuits

of ecclesiology, then might it also be countercultural in not seeing size and numerical growth as an indication of success. Further exploration of the concept of vocation, both personal and corporate, may well find other markers of fulfilment.

7.6 Proposals, provocative and others

Following the analysis of the gathered data, of various sources and forms, Provocative Propositions suggest a way forward in a specific way. A tool of Appreciative Inquiry, they were explained and set out at length in Chapter Six. Provocative Propositions aim to envisage a future that is both different and possible. They are based on the evidence discovered in the data analysis and based on the way the United Reformed Church lives and works out its declared ecclesiology. They are stated positively and confidently as some indefinite time in the not-too-distant future.

Eight of these statements were proposed:

- The prime locus for mission in the United Reformed church is the local church
- Ministry is a collective term for all the work that enables mission
- Ministry is practised in the United Reformed Church according to an agreed theological framework
- Each congregation has a recognised Local Church Leader
- Ministry is offered to each local church according to its discerned need
- Collaborative ministry teams work with groups of churches
- Vocation is the source of all mission and every ministry
- There is a strong sense of the Church following the Holy Spirit and prepared to take risks

Each Proposition was defended by reference to evidence from the data analysis and first steps to its fulfilment were explored. Each of these statements has been *espoused* during the lifetime of the URC, but in many areas are not *operant*. It is perhaps surprising how little new there is here and yet each statement has the potential for radical transformation. They

take ideas that are so often generally agreed in principle and make them possible, sometimes through subtle reworking of the *normative* and foundational texts.

The United Reformed Church is at a critical period in its history. The youngest of the mainstream denominations at only 47 years old, there are still members who remember its foundations. Some of those members lament the fact that it has become a denomination in its own right, rather than the beginning of a movement towards greater organic union. Martin Camroux, whose statistical work has been cited in earlier chapters, has entitled his most recent publication *Ecumenism in Retreat: How the United Reformed Church Failed to Break the Mould* (Camroux 2016) and he epitomises that disappointment that is still a feature of many. Some of these foundational members are, of course, rooted in distinct traditions for whom particular features are still important. This may be the connective nature of Presbyterianism, the church meetings of Congregationalism, the lay leadership of the Churches of Christ.

On the other hand, there are those, and I am one, who came into the URC from other denominations, whom the upheaval of union in the 1970s passed by and who accepted the Church as it was. They are joined by generations born since the unions, who have no knowledge of or even interest in the founding churches. These two groups have no desire to look back, at least with nostalgia, because they have either moved on from something else, which they have rejected, or consider anything almost 50 years ago as history and therefore more of interest than real relevance. A third group, with similarities to the second, is the ones who come to the URC, not because of its name, but because it is their nearest church and they have found a welcome there. They have no former experience of church and for them denomination is not relevant. It is the local church that is important.

Inevitably then, there are tensions when ecclesiology is discussed. There are sacred cows and shibboleths to trip one up in every direction. In my discussion of the URC's foundational ecclesiology I have tried to remain faithful to the intention of founders, inasmuch as it can be known, and yet

sit lightly to the pull of tradition. This tension is, as it seems to me, unspoken, possibly even unrecognised, at the root of many debates in General Assembly.

Placing the emphasis back on the local church resolves a number of these tensions. This is not to be understood as a return to congregationalism, because, at least for most local churches, that would leave them without support and, in some cases, without leadership. Maintaining the connection that has grown over these 40 or so years is essential if each local church is to be resourced to fulfil its potential. The vocation of each local church is also important. It creates an identity that goes beyond its name and begins to determine what kind of ministry is appropriate for its life and mission. One of the Vision 2020 statements referred to at the beginning of Chapter Six is still relevant –

The URC will be a Church where every local congregation will be able to say who they are, what they do and why they do it.

In the same way, the different councils of the Church, aside from the church meeting, will also have a strong sense of purpose and the officers and staff will begin to see themselves as servants, instead of – or as well as- leaders.

7.7 Moving on – questions to hand on

At the beginning of the Conclusion, I pointed out that this was only one stage in the ongoing development of ministry in the United Reformed Church. I have proposed radical changes to our approach to the structures enshrined in the *Basis of Union*, which would require change in different areas of church life – evolution rather than revolution.

The greatest of these changes is in the ethos or mindset of the Church.

This is a task that has begun. In 2015 the URC embarked on an exercise that had as its ambitious aim a changing of the culture of the denomination. Called *Walking the Way – Living the life of Jesus today*, it formally launched in September 2017 and focussed on discipleship.

Involving the Deputy General Secretaries of both Discipleship and Ministry, the project encourages the church in every place to embody whole life

discipleship as a means to developing and expanding the mission of the church. The URC is not alone in this endeavour and has partnered with the Methodist Church, who have put their focus on Holy Habits (Roberts 2016) and with the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, whose *Imagine* project focuses on whole-life discipleship (Hudson 2012). The move, from being a membership organisation, centred around Sunday worship, to being a gathering of people whose faith fills every aspect of their lives, outward looking and engaged in mission in its community, is ambitious, exciting and daunting in equal measure for many. Reinforcing the change and supporting and resourcing it through *Walking the Way* will be crucial to the success of my Propositions.

There should be a refreshing of the councils of the Church, General Assembly, Synod and church meetings. Church meetings have been the focus of attention at different times. In 2014 a report from the Faith and Order Committee wrote of the 'gift of conciliarity' (General Assembly book of reports 2014, p112) and with their eyes fixed on the church meeting, wrote of the concerns that have arisen at Mission Council of how the contemporary church meeting does not always live up to its intention. There is a preponderance of business matters, attendance is not always good and people seem unable to be open with one another. The subsequent car-park meeting is the subject of many a joke, as a place where the frank discussion really takes place. Alan Sell was also a champion of the church meeting, whilst lamenting its current phase of being (Peel 2019, p191). Peel does wonder whether the church meeting in its original form can really ever be revitalised (Peel 2019, p193) and he may be right, but it could be reinvented. Each church needs to find the best format, factoring in timing, agenda, room layout and leadership, to enable the participation of the whole congregation. It is not an easy task, but is potentially rewarding if it results in a revitalised congregation, taking ownership of its own life and mission.

A recent debate on General Assembly meetings has resulted in a return to annual meetings with one Moderator, those meetings ceasing the practice of moving around the countries and finding suitable place (General

Assembly book of reports 2018, p51). Membership of General Assembly will be reduced in number. Clearly this is partly a cost-cutting exercise but, coupled with the introduction over the past decade of consensus decision-making, offers the possibility of other changes. A review of the purpose of General Assembly in the light of a refocus on the importance of the local church, as I have proposed, would reduce the amount of business and resolutions needing concurrence from the other councils. A change in way the meeting is arranged, currently having a 'top table' mostly in gowns looked up to – literally when the table is on a stage – by the audience or congregation, could make it less intimidating for newcomers to step up to the microphone in debates and create more of a communal feel to the gathering. Similar transformations at Synod meetings, currently poorly attended, would bring more scope for such meetings – with less business – to be places for training and networking.

Thirty years ago there were five colleges used for full-time training of Ministers⁷⁰ as well as a number of ecumenical training courses offered locally around the country. Today only three colleges – in Manchester, Cambridge and Glasgow – are available. These Regional Centres of Learning (RCLs), as they are now called, are expected to offer training for elders and lay preachers, as well as Ministers, training for both stipendiary and self-supporting ministry. New on-line learning, under the title *Stepwise*, is being developed for lay learning. The RCLs work well in the Synods in which they are geographically situated, but feel remote from the churches in Synods without such facility, making it difficult for part-time training to be accessible for all.

Whole-life discipleship and every member ministry presupposes a commitment to life-long learning and life-long learning necessitates a flexible and fluid approach to education. Needs-based training should be available and accessible for every ministry, from the newest disciple to the Minister who has completed over 30 years of service. This places an

⁷⁰ Northern College in Manchester, Westminster College Cambridge, Scottish United Reformed and Congregational College are still used. The other two are Queen's College Birmingham and Mansfield College Oxford.

enormous demand on a small denomination. Ministers of Word and Sacrament are, for the most part, already trained in ecumenical cohorts, but this could work with other ministries too, given a little understanding of the nuances of the different denominations. Other academic disciplines or institutions may also have relevant resources to offer, as do people in the Church with existing skills and knowledge from other occupations. Changing the pattern of ministry throughout the Church will inevitably create different requirements from those who provide and commission training and may also create a real hunger for learning that can only be met by innovative and inventive means.

Ministry should always have adequate support and oversight.

Accountability is an important aspect of all ministry and how that is effected has been the subject of many a discussion. Supervision is beginning to be offered more regularly in the URC and some Synod Moderators have taken courses in Clinical Pastoral Education, and similar, in order to be more effective in their role as 'minister to the ministers'. Some ministers seek out their own spiritual direction, often from other denominations with a more developed history in this field. Ministerial Accompanied Self-Appraisal (MASA) was expanded into Local Mission and Ministry Review (LMMR) in 2006 to take in review of the whole life of the church and its ministry. Its intention was admirable, but in practice many Synods have found it difficult to find enough people to make four or five-yearly reviews of every church a real possibility.

Networking between Ministers happens in most place, but networking between churches has been patchy since the abolition of Districts in 2007. With fewer Ministers it will be even more important to sustain this peer support and to facilitate collaborative teams by bringing more people together for mutual support and learning. Creating a social environment, sharing meals round a table, will be a positive way of encouraging attendance but also make it easier for relationships to form.

In line with the conciliar nature of the Church, making leadership more functional than hierarchical is not always easy to arrive at, but essential when the aim is to draw on the skills of more people. Shared leadership,

according to gifts, should prevent dictatorships from forming and lead to a situation where taking on such a role seems less of a big deal.

These areas of change, consequent from the Provocative Propositions – new ways of meeting, life-long learning, networking and support – are all dependent on that first change – a change in the culture of the church.

There is, as I have indicated, already movement in all these areas, which suggests that the Propositions have found their moment.

7.8 And finally

In my introduction I defended my use of the word ‘crisis’ to describe the present concerns about ministry, by reference to its definition as a turning point. It is my hope that this work will become part of a movement that may be identified as the theologically employed term *kairos* – a propitious moment.

So one last Provocative Proposal – the United Reformed Church, in 2050, on the fiftieth anniversary of its last union is finally able to emerge from the traditions that underpinned it – Reformation, founding denominations, declarations over the years – and celebrate its identity as church in the Reformed tradition yet fit for the times: a body of disciples gathered at times for worship and learning and companionship, in communication through all the means available to contemporary society, relating to all the different contexts in which it is living, committed to playing its part in the mission of God in its community, yet still united by a common vision and hope.

United Reformed Church ministries

Ministry	Paid/voluntary	Appointment	Training	Recognition	Term	Retirement
Minister of Word & Sacrament	Stipendiary or self-supporting. Stipendiary Ministers have a Manse or housing allowance.	Initial vocation tested by Synod & Assembly panels.	Four years degree-level study at recognised college or university	Ordination into URC ministry, following a call to a pastorate. Induction thereafter.	Unless a stated termed post, length of stay is undetermined	Stipendiary Ministers normally retire at 68, but may remain active
Elder	Voluntary	Nominated and elected by local church members	Any training is locally decided. There is a recognised course.	Ordination to serve locally. Induction after a move only if nominated again.	Locally determined. Often renewed every 3 years.	Personal decision.
Church-Related Community Worker	Paid with house or housing allowance.	Initial vocation tested by Synod & Assembly panels.	Four years degree-level study at Northern College.	Commissioning after appointment to post.	Five years, with a further possible five years.	68
Lay preacher – Assembly accredited	Voluntary	Acceptance onto training course	URC training (normally 3 years part-time)	Accredited following completion of studies	N/A	Personal decision

Lay preacher – locally recognised	Voluntary	By invitation to local church	Synods determine their own recognised courses	Locally recognised – in Synod handbook only	N/A	Personal decision
Local Church Leader	Voluntary	Synod agreed process to determine call/suitability	Synods determine their own recognised courses	Inducted to serve a local church	Determined by Synod, often 3 years, but renewable	Mutual decision – between LCL and church
Moderator of Synod	Stipendiary (must be Minister of W&S)	Appointment panel. Candidates may be nominated or apply	All Moderators currently attend Bridge-builders conflict resolution training	Inducted	Initially 7 years, with a further 5 years possible	All Ministers retire at 68
Youth worker/family worker	Paid	Local appointment panel	Dependent on post and any nationally recognised standards	Sometimes inducted, or welcomed formally	Local church decision	National retirement age applies
Local lay ministry – hospital	Voluntary	Normally by volunteering,	Locally and personally	Sometimes recognised in	Local church and	Personal decision

ty, music, children		DBS checkin g if required .	deter mined	Sunday worship	personal decision	
Synod & Church house officers	Stipendia ry (if Minister of W&S) or paid	Appoint ment panel	Depen dent on post	Sometim es inducted , or welcome d formally at appropri ate event	Often termed appoint ments, sometim es renewed	68
Chaplain cies & academi c posts	Stipendia ry (if part of URC) or paid	Appoint ment panel, determi ned by employe r	Depen dent on post and emplo yer	Sometim es inducted , or welcome d formally at appropri ate event	Often termed appoint ments, sometim es renewed	Nation al retire ment age applies

Further information available - <https://urc.org.uk/clergy-and-office-holders/ministry-in-the-urc.html>

APPENDIX 2a

38 Bakers Close
Bishops Hull
Taunton
TA1 5HD

01823 276549
kathrynp53@gmail.com

Dear _____,

Last year's General Assembly in Cardiff discussed, among other things Ordained Local Ministry, non-stipendiary ministry age limit and the role of the synod moderator. In recent years there have also been the development of pioneer ministries and, further back, the ministry of Church Related Community Workers. We also have accredited lay preachers and ordained elders and, in some places, local church leaders. Ordained ministers of word and sacrament also work as chaplains in a range of locations, as well as academic and supportive/administrative posts. Despite this wide range of ministries, our theology of ministry is very limited, focusing mainly on the relationship between a minister of word and sacrament and a congregation.

I am currently working towards a PhD with the working title 'Towards a theological framework for Reformed ministry in the 21st century' and, as a major part of this work, plan to carry out a study of ministry in the South Western Synod. This will involve a range of exercises – mapping the current spread of stipendiary and non-stipendiary ministers and lay preachers, reviewing Synod policies on local church leaders and deployment and conversations with ministers, preachers, local leaders, elders and Synod staff.

I am inviting you to take part in these conversations. I anticipate that each conversation will last approximately an hour and a half. If you agree you will be sent some questions in advance, so that you have time to consider your responses. You will also be asked to sign a consent form and be given written assurance of anonymity. Unless I hear from you beforehand, I will phone you within the month to answer any questions you may have and make an appointment to carry out the conversation.

These are interesting, and potentially exciting, times in church life and I believe that together we can make a valuable contribution to the debate and help shape the future structure of our church.

shalom
Revd Kathryn Price
PhD student with Cardiff University

APPENDIX 2b

38 Bakers Close
Bishops Hull
Taunton
TA1 5HD

01823 276549
kathrynp53@gmail.com

Dear _____,

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research project.

I intend our meeting to be more of a conversation than an interrogation, but I will have some specific questions for you to respond to.

The areas we will talk about will include:

- What does the word 'ministry' mean to you?
- Describe your own ministry role
- How important is ordination to you?
- Who else practices ministry in your congregation?
- Does this meet the needs of the congregation? of the community?
- What support or further learning would enhance the total ministry of your congregation?

I have also enclosed a consent form, which we will both sign. I will contact you by phone or email to arrange our meeting.

shalom

Revd Kathryn Price

PhD student at Cardiff University

Ministry in the South Western Synod, United Reformed Church

Consent Form

I understand that my participation in this project will involve a conversation about ministry that will last up to approximately one and a half hours.

I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time.

I understand that the information I provide will be shared with the research team or research supervisor and may be used in subsequent publications.

I understand that the information provided by me will be held totally anonymously, so that it is impossible to trace this information back to me individually.

I understand that, in accordance with the Data Protection Act, this information may be retained indefinitely.

I, _____ (NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Kathryn Price, School of History, Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University with the supervision of Revd Canon Dr Andrew Todd.

Signed (researcher):

Signed (Participant):

Date:

From: Kathryn Price kathrynp53@gmail.com



Subject: Bible study next week

Date: 6 September 2017 at 17:27

Dear all,

A reminder that you are invited to Buckley next Wednesday at 10am.

We will begin with coffee and conversation and then, using the Contextual Bible Study method, look at some texts in our context of being practising ministers. The texts were all given to me during interviews in the South Western Synod when I asked what texts inspired or underpinned their ministry. (The interviews were part of my research into the theology of ministry)

I've attached the list for you to look at, should you wish. We will obviously not be able to tackle them all in depth. If you are not familiar with Contextual Bible Study, you will find an excellent introduction here -

http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/Ujamaa_CBS_bible_study_Manual_part_1_2.sflb.ashx

I will, with your permission record our session, and I have also attached the consent form (hard copies will be available) that the University requires for ethical research methods.

We will give 2 hours to this and then you are invited to stay for a light lunch.

I think it will be a stimulating discussion - it is quite a mixed bag of verses!

So far as I know you are all planning to come - so do let me know if you are not able to be there. I have copied you in, Simon, and you would be most welcome too.

shalom
Kathryn

72 Mill Lane, Buckley CH7 3HE
01244 547974

Emails to set up elders Contextual Bible study groups

19.09.17

Dear all

...

The second request -

those at the last pastorate meeting know that I am interested in putting together a group of elders - between 6 and 8 I think - to do some Bible study with me as part of my doctoral research. The session would last a couple of hours and we would look at one - or two - of the passages chosen by lay ministers I interviewed. I would record the session and you will be given consent forms to sign (required by the university) which will guarantee your anonymity. I know x is interested, but would welcome some other volunteers. I'd like to do this sometime in the next month and a day time session might be easier to arrange. Please let me know if you would like to take part and once I have a viable group gathered I'll sort out a date.

shalom

Kathryn

28.10.17

Elders Bible Study - Thanks to those who have responded. I will run this twice - firstly on Thursday 2nd November at 7.15pm (i.e. after the Archers1) and then on Tuesday 7th November at 10am. Both at the Manse. If you have not yet replied I hope that one of these dates will suit some of you, there is still room for more.

Contextual Bible Study

Consent Form

I understand that my participation in this project will involve a group Bible study that will last no more than 2 hours.

I understand that participation in this is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time.

I understand that the information I provide will be shared with the research team or research supervisor and may be used in subsequent publications.

I understand that the information provided by me will be held totally anonymously, so that it is impossible to trace this information back to me individually.

I understand that, in accordance with the Data Protection Act, this information may be retained indefinitely.

I, _____(NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Kathryn Price, School of History, Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University with the supervision of Revd Canon Dr Andrew Todd.

Signed (researcher):

Signed (Participant):

Date:

Interview matrix Kathryn M Price (student no. 986053344)

Appendix 3a

Context → Ministry ↓	City	(Market) Town	Rural	Seaside	Hospital	University	LEP	Other	Group interview
Stipendiary		SM1 SM2		SM3/ GM1B (g) SM7	HC1 HC2		SM6	SM4	GM1
PT Stipendiary	GM1D(g)	SM5	X			GM1C(g)		SM5	
NSM	GM1E(g)	NSM2	NSM4		NSM3			NSM1	
Retired			RM1					GM1A (g)	
Local church leader	LM3								
Elder	GE1		GO1A(g)						GE1 GO1

Lay Preacher	GLP1F (g) GLP1C (g)	GO1B(g)	LP1 GLP1E(g)	GLP1D (g) GLP1B(g) GLP1A(g)					GLP1
Lay worker				LM2				LM1	
Informal		LM4							

Colours indicate areas of Synod: (g) interviewed as part of group

deleted squares = not relevant/appropriate

Wiltshire, Greater Bristol, Somerset, Devon, Cornwall

Fieldwork paired conversations coded with number and category of**responses**Effective Ministry

Theme	Code	Lay responses	Stipendiary minister responses	Non-pastoral minister responses
Growing Faith	worship	4	8	6
	teaching	3	5	3
	evangelism	1		
	enabling	2	2	3
	youth work	1	3	4
Community building	food	4	5	3
	pastoral care	4	6	5
	openness/presence	4	2	4
	context	2	5	3
	listening	2		3
	communication	1		
	working together	4	3	2
Stewardship & generosity	relationship	4	2	3
	stewardship	4	1	
	generosity	2		

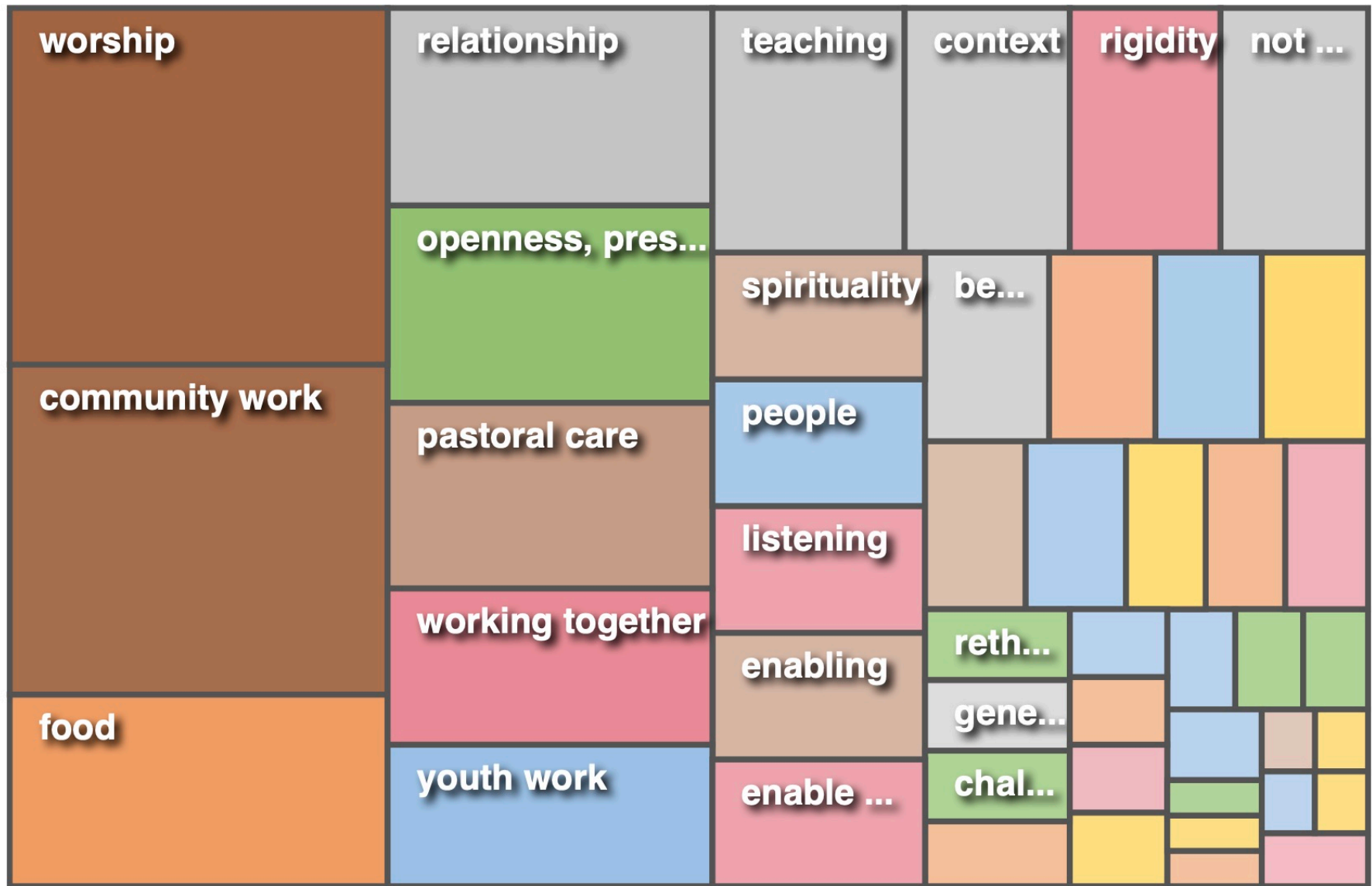
Opportunities for change

Rigidity in church life	bureaucracy		3	2
	old-fashioned Sunday school	1	1	
	ridigity	5	1	3
	worship	2	1	2
	not reaching out	4	2	4
	insularity	1		1
	alienated from culture	1	1	1

	new estates	1	1	
New approaches to ministry	creative approach to ministry		1	
	people	4	1	3
	real team work	1		
	youth work	1		1
	resources	1	2	1
	consistent theology	1	1	1
Sense of depression	dying churches	1		1
	loss of confidence		2	
	low expectations	1		
	time			1
	spread of ministers	1	4	

Possible resources

Change in structures	local church leadership	1		
	challenge structures	1	1	
	palliative care for churches		2	
	rethink deployment	2	1	
	train differently	1		
	enable people	1	6	1
	good support structures		1	
Better relationships	better relationships	1	3	1
	communication		3	
	connect with community	3	1	2
Spiritual growth	spirituality	3	2	2



APPENDIX 3d

SM6

Stipendiary minister, ordained 2001, second pastorate in United Area
(Methodist/URC), 50s

Interviewed at the minister's home, in the living room

1 so effective ministry what effective ministry do you see around you
2 what's really working
3 what's working [] the café at [M]
4 do you want me to describe it yeah
5 they sold the church building because it was no longer fit for purpose
6 there was a new village community hall being built so they worship
7 there em and so church is very straightforward elders meetings doesn't
8 really have any fabric issues which used to take up all my life mmh
9 so that's gone which is great so we can talk about church which is
10 refreshing and with the proceeds of the sale they bought a
11 shop unit right in the middle of the village they employ somebody
12 and the whole whole ethos of the project is to keep econ
13 keep some of the economy in the village going so employ
14 somebody everything that they sell is made locally all the cakes
15 all the produce and what they can't um can't purchase
16 locally is fairly traded even the ice cream comes from a local ice cream
17 supplier um and it's a community hub it's one of the only
18 places in the village where people can come have conversation make
19 friends other than the pub and the pubs are struggling so yea it gives
20 people another place to meetem
21 specially I think for particularly for women of a certain age they're
22 not used to meeting in pubs it was never part of their culture em
23 so yeah it's been a good place and the other thing they were
24 trying to do is they naively thought that the profits from the café would
25 enable them to employ a youth worker cos they also have the flat
26 above so there's a rental income from that but in their first year they ran
27 at a loss but the money from the tips pot was donated to the local
28 secular youth club and so there's now a good relationships there
29 this year we asked the customers we gave them a list of
30 local em youth clubs and projects and they voted Waitrose style
31 and the money's going to the local Scouts and Guides and
32 we've just opened a new venture in partnership with the Council and the
33 local secondary school on Tuesday night called the Food Cave where

34 some of the older kids come and they're trained to use all the coffee-making
35 machinery all the ice cream milkshake stuff tills so they're
36 getting skills that can go on their CVs punctuality customer service
37 um service industry skills and they're serving other kids from the
38 school so now at least one evening a week the kids have got
39 somewhere safe and dry with wifi cos they can't survive without
40 it um where they can meet and they the kids have
41 done their own market research and their own promotion in the school
42 they selected all the merchandising that goes with it they've created
43 the menu um and [] Council have done all the back office stuff
44 they've done all the policies all the safeguarding all the training
45 um and they've subsidized our costs so we can give the kids the
46 menu they want at the price they can afford without the café being out of
47 pocket so everybody wins and it's just another step and another
48 indicator that the café is not just a church venture for church people
49 cos initially folk did think 'oh that's where Christians go for a coffee'
50 but we are getting now a lot of regulars from the wider community
51 and they're speaking very positively about it and we're getting some
52 people coming into church because of it so again it's a
53 good synergy so that's definitely working well
54 um and that church is thriving it's a church where most
55 people are em below retirement age rather than above it which is
56 refreshing (laughs) so that's good em what else working well
57 I've got a Methodist chapel em that's in the middle of
58 well it hides behind a hedge out in the countryside um and you
59 could say it's just waiting to die but it works well with the parish
60 church and whilst it's not doesn't have a huge
61 congregation the congregation there is is actually mainly people from []
62] who almost use it as their chapel of ease they have the big church in the
63 morning and they have the country chapel in the evening but we do have
64 some people from the village who come and we had um it's got a
65 village green right in front of it and we had an afternoon service there in
66 partnership with the Anglicans um a couple of Sundays ago

67 and we had like a jazz group that did the music and then they just
68 played light easy-listening jazz afterwards and people brought the picnics
69 and barbecues and there was 87 people *goodness* just enjoying
70 sitting out on the green and worshipping together and enjoying each other's
71 company and maybe a glass of wine or two it was fantastic it's just
72 things like that and you go mmmm it's not dead yet (laughs)
73 um it's lovely and we do things like rogation and we go to
74 the local farm um and we walk round the parish boundary and things like
75 this it's good *mm* yeah
76 the work at [] also we have a good partnership with the Anglicans there
77 we have once a month a joint service and this month we had a pet
78 service and there were again there was 50 people in the congregation
79 and 13 dogs and one very nervous hamster (*laughter*)
80 and um yeah that was a good showing so yeah there's
81 a lot of good stuff going on
82 *how about []* [] is good for different reasons because they
83 have a good building they've put a lot of money and effort into it and
84 people have been generous and so it's a good um worship space
85 everybody that comes in says that how welcoming and light and
86 contemporary it is without it being so modern that it feels not like a
87 church *mm* and yea it's well-equipped so we can do a lot of
88 things with it and we have a good catering committee and everybody talks
89 about that whenever we have a funeral we do the bunfight afterwards
90 and people always speak very warmly about that um we have the
91 coffee mornings it's a it's a place where people come to
92 collect their Food Bank parcels as well as a place where people can drop
93 them off um and we're part of we were one of the founders of the
94 Food Bank so it's well-used by Food Bank clients it has a good
95 um Tuesday Fellowship Group used to be the young
96 wives and then they became the older wives and now it's men as well
97 and that's well supported it has a good outreach for them
98 em we have a lot of good music a lot of events there's a lot that
99 goes on in [] as a town anyway and and the church sort of reflects

100 that there isn't a weekend goes by without there being some sort of
101 festival or carnival in town and yeah the church reflects that as well
102 and it works well with the other churches in the area there is
103 a good partnership um the only thing we don't do well is
104 worship together (laughs) but you know we the Food Bank we have
105 a prayer station we have a Taize service we have a thing
106 called the Open Door project which is open three days a week where
107 vulnerable homeless people can come and have a shower and use
108 the washing machine and access professional advice on the internet
109 em we have what else have we gotoh we're starting to
110 look at Eco-congregations together um there's umpteen different
111 projects going on I can't remember half of them that are done
112 between the churches and different churches support different projects
113 depending on their different emphases and interests we have
114 the Good Friday walk service and walk of witness yeah we did Christian
115 Aid week together we did an abseil down one of the churches together
116 and got the bishop in and the radio involved so there's a lot that
117 happens we had a Pentecost party in the park em yeah
118 it's good it's a good place to be and the United Area is
119 good that works well we all have as ministers we have our
120 particular sectors if you like or pastorates as I prefer to call it
121 but we see each others churches particularly in the evenings I go
122 out to other churches and lead worship and we have it
123 performs the functions that District councils used to you know
124 I'm the convenor of the training committee and so the churches
125 will say 'Ok we'd like training on that' and we can we do this
126 in-house or do we need to bring somebody in to do it yeah
127 it's on the whole it's good there's always a concern about
128 deployment I'm the only URC minister here I arrived
129 and 6 months later [] left yes but all my colleagues
130 are Methodist and they're all gonna leave in the next 5 years and so
131 the expectation is that they're all gonna be replaced by URCs and it's just
132 not gonna happen no (laughs) but equally I don't know if the

133 Methodists can replace them either so em that's a concern
134 but we've got churches that are growing and we've got churches
135 that aren't and we're closing them so it's they're trying to manage it as
136 best they can mm
137
138 *what about individual ministries I have to say that 2 of the people I've*
139 *talked to have mentioned you going into pubs (laughs)*
140 yes funny that at the bottom of the garden is a disused railway cutting and
141 the other side of that there is a pub and yes I've never had a local pub
142 before and this one was very welcoming um and they'd
143 never seen a vicar before I think is the best way to put it so I was
144 a curiosity so they've enjoyed prodding me to see what gives
145 um and they just have come to understand that I'm actually a
146 human being I do enjoy a drink and I do enjoy some banter and I think
147 at that point they relaxed um and it led very quickly I think the first
148 Christmas I was here em bearing in mind I only came in November
149 we did beer and carols *right yes* and at the
150 pub the local morris side use it as place to rehearse so they did the music
151 side on their accordions and part way through we stopped and they
152 did some wassailing and went out into the car park and did a morris dance
153 and then came back in and we continued I think we started at 7 o
154 clock and by 10 o'clock I said 'thanks for coming folks enjoy your
155 drinks Happy Christmas' and they said 'no we want to keep going'
156 I couldn't stop them singing carols and yea it went really
157 well so we did it again last Christmas and we're booked for this Christmas
158 and we set up a thing called Pub Church um I launched that
159 in my first summer and I simply said 'I'm going to be here on the
160 second Sunday of the month in the evenings if you want to come and have a
161 pint and a chat about life I'll be there' and I think it was more out
162 of curiosity but I think at one point we had about 12 people meeting round
163 the table talking about stuff and I've used various resources
164 I've used em the oh what's it called the Christ we
165 share pack *oh yes* and just got them to pick and picture and talk

166 about why they picked that one and I think that was probably too
167 much too soon for some of them *right* em and I've used the Table Talk
168 resources as well and they've been quite good and some of the
169 people that I gathered at pub church have been for want of a better
170 word refugees from some of the local churches where they found they
171 didn't fit any more em one woman who started candidating for the
172 ministry and decided it wasn't for her and then her face didn't fit when she
173 went back to her church em and yea just some of them are
174 locals from the pub but that's sort of I think as curiosity's worn off
175 it's just petered out so now I'm for want of a better word I'm more
176 of a pub chaplain I'm there I have a quiet drink on my own
177 and people know who I am and they just come and sometimes they
178 just want to natter about stuff I've got a new neighbor who's
179 discovered who I am and he used to be a Christian so he's an atheist
180 convert and he's like all converts very enthusiastic about his
181 perspective and how I'm wrong so all he wants to do is have an
182 argument and it's like 'I'm having a pint I'm not having and
183 argument with you I'll chat' and he's discovered he's got cancer
184 and it's yea it's opened up all sorts of conversations so yea that's
185 what Pub Church is or was I have a tankard in their that the landlord gave
186 me on my birthday and it says Rev Pub Church so it just
187 feels like I'm part of the community in a different way to other
188 ministers here they have their own ministries one of them's a
189 chaplain to the police who have their county headquarters here um
190 whereas I'm in a pub oh I'm involved with the Fire Service *oh right*
191 they have their their county headquarters is here as well and I
192 inherited their Christmas carol service we've done 2 or 3 of those and they've
193 really enjoyed them um and so we've been I've been invited to
194 their awards ceremony each year and yea that's been a
195 really fruitful partnership always looking for the next one and what we
196 can do differently this year will be it will be their 10th carol service
197 and it will be their last as [] Fire & Rescue cos they're merging with [] so
198 what what the future will hold they don't know the

199 people from [] won't come up here for a carol service and equally the []
200 people aren't gonna drive into [] for a carol service so I'm hopeful
201 that we can continue that in some way *mm* but it's been a good
202 relationship yea
203
204 *what about lay ministry who's we have er what stands out*
205 *there*
206 we have some good people at both at St Andrew's in [] and at
207 Trinity [] [] is solely Methodist church and it's understood
208 now because it the congregation wasn't big enough for it to have a
209 treasurer and a church secretary so that's now a class of St Andrew's and St
210 Andrew's does all the admin for it and runs everything and the
211 membership rolls are combined but in St Andrew's I've got
212 I've got people that have been on international committees for
213 Methodism I've got local lay preachers I've got retired Baptist
214 ministers em and there's good good people we've got
215 superb pastoral workers em
216 yea yea I'm blessed and and in [] I've got a church secretary
217 who is also (laughs) the manager for [] and the administrator for the
218 Anglican benefice so she's she's Mrs [] and (laughs) I can't
219 afford to lose her and she's also a worship leader and I've
220 also got somebody who used to be the marketing director for the
221 Bible Society *right* so he's got fingers in pies you know he used to
222 run CRE and he plays a fairly low-key role in church but he'll I can
223 drop anything on him and he'll handle it so he's good like that
224 and em he owns and runs a vineyard which is also good
225 (laughs) but yea they're all very capable people I've got another
226 person who he was the driving or he is the driving force behind []
227 um so he's got a business head but knows that he's not running this
228 for business reasons *mmh* em and that's superb to see somebody
229 who's found their niche and is using their gifts
230 em yea there's some good people
231

232 *so how would you define ministry* my ministry or *ministry*
 233 *what's the definition for you of ministry*
 234
 235 ooh
 236
 237 um I would it's it's what we do for God I can't
 238 and by we I mean any Christian it's you know OK I'm paid
 239 and trained to have a particular role in a particular place but I'm
 240 not the only minister with a capital M if you like or with a dog collar
 241 occasionally um yea the best definition that I've found was
 242 it my anniversary in July for ordination and the I don't
 243 know where I found it but it just leapt out for me and I think it was
 244 from the Methodist Church in Singapore em and I mean I can
 245 read it or I can email it
 246 *I think I know the one you mean* that one yes yes I don't
 247 know where it just coincided with the anniversary of my
 248 ordination and I just thought 'that'll do I can live with that even if it did
 249 come from the Methodist church' (laughs) but since reading it I've seen
 250 umpteen people go 'oh I've seen that somewhere else' so who knows
 251 where it comes from *no I think I've seen it from the Methodists somewhere*
 252 I think it's yea I like that it's what it's what we do
 253 for God is the nearest I can get which isn't very theological but
 254
 255
 256 *so what do you think* yea *what are we not doing for God* what
 257 *might be better* *are there things we are missing whether for lack of*
 258 *money or will* *are there things that perhaps need to be just quietly*
 259 *kicked into touch because they* sometimes I think we yea I
 260 I think certainly in the URC we are we are doers mmh
 261 em and now and again we need reminding that we're called
 262 to be we're human beings not human doings we're called to be
 263 ministers not to do ministry em we the joke is that in the
 264 more anglo-catholic churches that they have saints days and we have

265 special causes (laughs) whatever they might be and they're all
266 worthy worthy causes you know they're all worthwhile er and yes
267 as a church that is maybe struggling with resources it's not
268 for me to say what we should stop doing but I think sometimes we
269 should just relax a bit and say we're doing the best we can and
270 that's OK it's like people who want to be the perfect parent you
271 can't all you're gonna do is have a nervous breakdown just be good
272 enough mm if some things don't get done they don't get done
273 you know and if we don't have somebody to fill all the posts
274 then we don't and it would be better if we did but it's OK em and I
275 think we spend a lot of time tearing ourselves apart or agonizing over
276 stuff that we ought to be doing and it's just can't eh
277 whether it's [] or whether it's equal opps or whether it's
278 whatever it is somethings just aren't gonna get done and
279 that's OK
280
281 and I I don't think I can't think of things we shouldn't be doing em
282 but I'm just I'm quite relaxed about when things don't get done
283 (laughs)
284 and I'm one of those that doesn't get things done on a regular basis
285 (laughs)
286 so
287 *what about things that actually we don't do well enough*
288 *or things that we're missing*
289 *this business about human beings is that a sense that are you sensing*
290 *that somehow the spiritual side of the church has drifted a bit*
291 I think
292 we oh the only way I can put it is to go back to the pub thing
293 I had a text from the the landlord a couple of
294 months ago just to say 'we miss you' and that made me say
295 'hmm I haven't been to the pub for a while' and that's because I've been
296 too busy being a minister doing whatever it is I'm doing and meetings
297 and OK some of it was because I've now got a new foster

298 child and well my life's changed but I though
 299 something's not right if I'm not if I'm too busy being church
 300 then I'm not involved in the community em and it's all been
 301 worthwhile stuff but it means I've lost touch somewhere and so it was
 302 almost no it's not the opposite of not being spiritual enough
 303 cos that means being spiritual means being tucked away somewhere
 304 special and that's not my idea *no no* of being a Christian I
 305 I yea so something I felt sad when I got that
 306 that I had yea that I should have been there and I was
 307 somewhere else em and my churches are superbly
 308 em supportive of this pub church thing they've never come to
 309 it and I've made it very clear to them it's not their place
 310 erm but equally they've never asked how much time I spend
 311 or money or whether I'm drinking too much or any of
 312 the usual non-conformist *uhhuh* Methodist hang-ups to do with drink
 313 em that's never happened they're always supportive and
 314 they're pleased as punch that it is happeningem but I've realized it's not
 315 and um so I think I think we spend too much time being church
 316 and not enough time being Christians ministering
 317 whatever it is being in the world to use that old model
 318 *would you say that's true of congregations as well* mm yea I think
 319 most of the conversations that I have with congregations and indeed
 320 with ministers on URC facebook forums before I left them was
 321 seem to be fixated about church life and the state of the church or
 322 our particular congregation or the building or money or deployment
 323 and there didn't seem to be a lot of conversation about the
 324 person I met on the bus or in the pub or wherever and it was all
 325 inward *yes* em I have more spiritual conversations with people when
 326 I do funerals or over a pint than I do after Sunday worshipand that
 327 isn't right *mm yes*
 328 I was talking to someone this morning about joining their chaplaincy team
 329 for [] County Council and he said whenever we do things he said
 330 that the current population now have so little knowledge of Christianity

331 they haven't been inoculated against it and that to me that's
332 code for 'but our church folk have' they've heard the
333 stories so often now they're inoculated the the wonder the em
334 power of the stories is lost on them cos they've heard them too
335 often
336 and that doesn't happen with people outside the church so maybe we
337 should stop having church for a bit (laughs) maybe we should have
338 Christmas in June so we can escape the commercialism and just rediscover
339 what Christmas is um it's that kind of stuff that would
340 intrigue me I'd be terrified cos I'd get I wouldn't last 10 minutes
341 (laughs)
342 *I mean that's my next question is you know what steps are needed*
343 *to respond to these things that you've been talking about you*
344 *know the too much focus on church and er and that side of things the*
345 *doing and not being mm what is it do you think that will move*
346 *us into possibly a more healthy balance I mean there's a*
347 *general question but there's also is there something that the Synod*
348 *might start the denomination*
349
350 I don't know
351 mm when when that vicar said that this morning about
352 chaplaincy the feeling I get cos I just don't enough of my history
353 was that em almost that that ministry was
354 turning back almost to sort of a medieval time where you have
355 people in whom the stories are invested and they tell you the
356 stories and they they practice the rituals and you go to them
357 um but there is this great unknowing for the general
358 population em
359 and I think that's what that quote about ordination was about these
360 are the people in whom all we're asking of ordained ministers
361 is that you practice the rituals and you remember and you tell the stories
362 and that's all that ministry is the rest of ministry is what everybody's
363 supposed to be doing um but that we might become storytellers

364 em and that shouldn't be restricted to an hour on a Sunday
365 morning in a special building um but how do we release people
366 to do that when our model of ministry is that we are funded by people
367 who meet for an hour on a Sunday morning and they bless em
368 they need looking after and I don't begrudge them that
369 em and the ones that I know are working their socks off most of
370 them (laughs) to minister and they do desperately want to share
371 what they've received with others somehow they've lost their voice
372 um
373 *so finding the voice is crucial* yeah their confidence em but it's
374 everything else that is smothering the church there's legislation
375 and it's good (sighs) I can't argue against it we have to put
376 our house in order for things like safeguarding um but when I have
377 to tell an 80 year old feller 'please you cannot go and climb the ladder to
378 change the lightbulb' 'why I've always been doing it' 'yea but I
379 know you can do it and you know you can do it but our insurance won't
380 allow you to do it' and it's this kind of stuff *is that cos he's over 80*
381 yea and all the copyright stuff and St Andrew's is big
382 enough it can handle it but when you've got the URCs that I
383 came from with congregations of 20 they just cannot get their heads round
384 all this legislation and food hygiene em performing rights and
385 licences it's just in the 14 years or whatever it's been since I came
386 into the ministry just so much legislation's come out that I it is
387 crushing the life out of smaller churches and the reality is that many of our
388 URCs are small em and yea
389 *is that where churches working together is helpful*
390 yes it can be yea I mean that's where I've appreciated the Synod and
391 all the resources that the Synod brings and em so Jan Murphy
392 and her safeguarding work has been a real asset um and that's not
393 something I could have worked out for myself *no* you know
394 Raoul his head around buildings and everything to go with that
395 that's where I see the wider church being a resource

396 *you also talked about St Andrew's supporting the other church* yea they
397 do yea they support [] and I mean it's quite a it
398 could be seen as quite patronizing but it works they love going there
399 and they love the the congregation the remnant of the
400 congregation that's still there and they care for them um
401 and in return they have this wonderful building in the countryside
402 where they can have an evening service that's much more intimate in feel
403 than something they would ever have in St Andrew's so yea it
404 works but I yea that was as far as I how that was a natural
405 relationship it wasn't something that the wider church foisted on them
406 *no* em but er yea I think I think church is either
407 larger groupings can support one another clusters
408 or where there are natural relationships and I think that
409 was part of []'s problem there was no other local church to link with
410 em but and that's why the United Area works as well
411 that we can look out for each other and we can we try to put
412 resources into churches where there's signs of hope or growth and then
413 those churches where that's not happening we try to take hard decisions
414 and then use those resources again
415 *yea anything else you can think of* *you know* *it would be really good*
416 *if we did this*
417
418
419 em if Synod did this or *or you did or* we (laughs) yea
420 I mean I could put I know some of what my weaknesses are and I'd
421 like help you know I'd love to have a PA that would just keep me
422 organized but that's a different thing em
423 I wish we weren't as proud I see I still I come back to doing
424 things by geography rather than by brand I wish em
425 I wish the Methodists were more flexible I wish the Anglicans
426 didn't think they were the premier league and I wish within Anglicanism
427 there weren't these wheels within wheels and power it's all
428 about power and my little empire and that just does my

429 head in the local Baptist church here their minister is poorly and
430 he's gonna have to have heart surgery in the autumn so I've
431 just said to him 'look we're here we at St Andrews we're not gonna
432 patronize you but how can we help' and they've filled most of their
433 preaching but they've got a couple of months where he said 'can you help
434 with leading worship' so I said 'yes one Sunday St Andrew's will come to
435 your church and we'll have a service in your church and the other Sunday
436 you lot can come to mine and we'll have worship here' and I said 'if we can't
437 do that as Churches Together what's the point of all the rest of it' mm
438 and that to me is what it's about it's about saying 'we're not the
439 same we don't make decisions the same way we don't believe the
440 same things necessarily but it doesn't really matter' mm you
441 know I'd try to do the same thing had it been my Anglican colleague
442 and try to work with their structures however they whatever they
443 need to still feel comfortable I would have done I if they wanted me to
444 wear a frock I'd wear a frock I don't care but I mean it's easier with
445 the Baptists because we're ish we can work the same way but to
446 me it's about that it's about us being able to be generous with
447 each other and sometimes we're not and I mean sometimes I
448 see that between URCs they we're so scared of our
449 situation that we've lost the generosity sometimes and I just
450 yea a little less pride and a little more generosity that's what we
451 need to do more em you know so desperate to
452 keep my show on the road that I can't give up or let go of anything that
453 might benefit somebody else em and we need to
454 *what's your image of God how does that tie in with your model of*
455 *ministry*
456 it's been a while since I've been asked that er
457 *I mean is it it could be rooted in a particular Bible text*
458 it's about community em yea it's about
459 (sighs) it's about community what does that mean um
460 (sighs) God is not aloof God is about relationship em and God
461 is to be found in in relationship in people so I'm not a high church

462 person I'm a pub person (laughs) and I I enjoy being with
 463 people and structures and all of that doesn't only interests me as
 464 long as it fulfills that em
 465 *I'm not putting words into your mouth but are you talking about*
 466 *incarnational God* yea yea yes I am that's why I'm fostering
 467 I mean it's not something I set out to do it's what [] is doing
 468 but that's how I understand it for me yea it is about this
 469 generosity it's not about the pride it's not about my kingdom
 470 yes I'd love bringing people into ministry I want a bigger
 471 congregation than the Anglicans but it's (laughter) that's just
 472 honest so I have an ego so what but it isn't about when I bring
 473 people into membership it's as much about the wider church being
 474 encouraged that these individuals will say 'I want to be here this is
 475 my place for this time and it's about encouraging the rest of the
 476 congregation it's not just about them and their journey with God
 477 em so it's and it's the same when I do a wedding or I do a
 478 funeral it's it's always about the relationships and incarnational
 479 yes em it's about the relationship and where God is to be
 480 found is is when (laughs) when two people realize
 481 they're not alone that there's something more than just em
 482 *and is there a Bible text a story a passage a song or something*
 483 *that really crystalises that for you*
 484 (sighs) em not
 485 I guess it's that it's more it's more that the Bible is the story of
 486 God's people in relationship with God (laughs) it's that whole
 487 text its I used to be I came from a catholic charismatic
 488 background so I used to have all the texts (laughs) at my fingertips but I
 489 don't any more
 490 *or a hymn or a song something that*
 491 oh well O Jesus I have promised yea I've had that at every
 492 significant chapter of my life
 493 yes *the one you were talking about relationships we sang it on*
 494 *Sunday at [] it's Brian Wren's hymn we are not alone* OK

495 *I don't know if you know that one it is about being part of yea of a*
496 *greater whole yea yea can't remember the number but it's in Rejoice*
497 *and Sing I've opened Rejoice and Sing twice I think since coming here*
498 *and only when I get to URCs solely URCs yes I miss it but*
499 *OK thanks ever so much*

APPENDIX 3e

HC1

Minister of Word & Sacrament, ordained 1986, previously worked in pastorates and as Synod training officer, healthcare chaplain since 2010

Interviewed in his office in the hospital, during the working day

1 *the first question I want to ask [] is erm and you can answer this from*
2 *your work here or from wherever you see it where do you see effective*
3 *ministry happening*
4 I think I'd better start by answering from the hospital cos that's where I see
5 ministry
6 *well yes*
7 most of all
8 *yes*
9
10 well everyday I think is an answer I want to give um in
11 encounters with patients and staff and visitors around the hospital em
12 what people look for from us is an interesting question *mhmh*
13 em what we think is effective and what's effective for a family or
14 a patient that's a question isn't it but just to give you a few
15 scenarios *stories are good* yeah never a week goes by without
16 me being asked to go to someone towards the end of life and
17 um sometimes I do ask the family who are gathered
18 'what would you like me to do?' because there's a whole range
19 of things they could choose you know anointing or just prayers or a
20 scripture reading but some of them look at me as though I'm stupid
21 'oh I thought you were the one who was meant to know what you're
22 supposed to do' and they just want something but they don't really
23 know what it is they want me to turn up and do the religious
24 thing um and for them effective ministry is going to be
25 something that does more than fulfill their expectations cos their
26 expectations are so low so if I just said a prayer and went away they
27 might think 'oh that's done then' but to me that wouldn't be effective
28 ministry I would want to do something that would give them a
29 sense of the presence of God which is incredibly difficult to aim for when
30 people aren't terribly spiritual very easy in a prayer meeting but not so easy
31 when a family is kind of 'oh let's get the vicar' um but I would
32 want to create that sense that God is with us that your loved
33 one is safe because God is merciful and kind and gracious I wouldn't want

34 to go too heavy on the whole forgiveness thing but I'd want to
35 effective ministry to me would be to touch the hearts and minds of
36 the people there and give reassurance to the person who is
37 dying who may or may not be able to hear what is going on
38
39 mm something that I always say when I have students with me sometimes
40 to families themselves is that what I want for someone towards the end of
41 their life is to be at peace with them selves at peace with those around
42 them and at peace with God mm so if you like effective
43 ministry is quite simple to define it would be to achieve all three
44 of those things in some way or to contribute to achieving
45 them yeah I mean it's not all gonna come from me but it may be
46 that I have a key role in creating the circumstances where someone can find
47 those things yes that of course is just one kind of example which is
48 common in hospital but less common elsewhere yes
49 em I was with somebody yesterday who'd just received a very
50 difficult diagnosis of a life-long progressive condition what was
51 effective ministry for that person well to start with it was to be there
52 his opening words were 'well I glad you've come right now'
53 um to be the kind of person he could talk to at that moment
54 you know I said 'have you spoken to your wife yet' and he said 'no
55 she's coming in at 2 o'clock' so it's very raw at that moment
56 and very difficult simply to get your head round all the
57 implications of this were and just to be there not to offer advice just to
58 be there sharing that sense of bewilderment and again just affirm that God
59 would be with them through the struggle they were now going to have to
60 face that was effective ministry for me we also shared
61 communion together because that person's spirituality he asked
62 if he could receive communion and the answer is kind of 'give me ten
63 minutes (laughter) we can do this' um but to be able to again
64 in the context of a ward which isn't always that peaceful
65 to create the sacred space in which someone felt strengthened by
66 receiving the sacrament that's effective ministry and

67 yes meeting people's needs isn't it not always what
68 they think they're looking for but that's part of it that's part of it not
69 being paternalistic and thinking you know what they need when they
70 haven't told you that but I'm always dealing with people whose faith if
71 fragile or rudimentary not very well formed and so again it's
72 more than just fulfilling expectations it's its' raising
73 horizons beyond that and giving people what they need at that moment I
74 suppose *mm*
75 I could probably answer this question Kathryn for the next three hours
76
77 *well I want to ask you and push you a bit what about beyond you*
78 *where else is ministry happening here*
79 oh goodness me loads loads in loads of ways
80 um well the obvious ones will be my colleagues and our volunteer
81 team all of whom offer effective ministry um and team work is really
82 really crucial to us here cos no one can be here 24/7 as a chaplain
83 but clearly patients are and things can crop up at any time and you
84 always have to trust someone else with the pastoral care of someone that
85 you might be deeply concerned about um sharing in an
86 ecumenical team is wonderful and you see effective ministry
87 happening in ways you couldn't really offer um so so that's
88 good
89 one of the things we look for in a chaplaincy volunteer is the
90 confidence both in themselves and in God to actually offer effective
91 ministry and not always say 'oh you'll have to see a chaplain'
92 *ahah* we say to them 'if someone wants to pray with you
93 that's what you need to do so you need to be ready for that and
94 prepared for that ' and you try to help them whether they need copies
95 of prayers or whether they're absolutely fine off the cuff but that's
96 effective ministry
97 listening to people is a huge part of what we do and that's very effective
98 ministry because well I suppose the theological
99 word for it is incarnation isn't it because you meet with somebody in their

100 real life and possibly changing it just by being there not by doing anything
101 else um but if you want a much broader definition of
102 ministry well there's people whose job isn't to be a
103 Christian presence but they actually effectively are because of the way
104 they carry themselves and what they are and how they apply their faith in
105 real life and we do have significant numbers of nursing and medical staff and
106 ancillary staff here who are here because they feel called to be um
107 and if someone has a calling 'I want to work in a hospital and not
108 somewhere else' and even if they work in the restaurant or our sort of
109 cleaning team you feel that must be ministry in some ways because
110 they feel they're called to do it um and so if they do their
111 job well they are offering something important in Christ's name
112 and I'm very humbled by the number of people and the range of
113 jobs they do who sincerely have chosen to do what they do somewhere
114 where they can help people because they feel that's how they should be
115 using their life so that all goes on here
116 *yeah* I see that all the time I wouldn't like to classify as ministry every
117 good thing that happens here cos I think that's being too broad *uhuh*
118 *yeah* lots of people do very good things but not from a faith perspective
119
120 *so ministry is definitely from a faith perspective*
121 well I that's how I would understand it *that's fine* see it
122 would have to be living out your Christian life and offering something from
123 God through what you do or say preferably both but
124 more doing than saying if push comes to shove (laughs)
125
126 *yes so what might be better*
127
128 might be better than what
129 *well my definition of better would be are there opportunities that are*
130 *missed are there things that are not actually its more likely in a church*
131 *setting this but things that have had their day if you like*

132 yes again it's different in a hospital to in a local church *yeah* but we
133 still suffer from fossilization in place (laughs)
134 um I could talk about Sunday here for example *yes*
135 em what we have here on a Sunday is a long way from what I feel would
136 be best practice em we have a group of volunteers who come in
137 for a little communion service at 9 o'clock they then take that
138 communion to patients who are unable to come to chapel then we have a
139 service in chapel at 10.15 for those who can and a few other people who
140 regard the hospital chapel as their local church for historic reasons and
141 always come
142 and to me it would be much better to have everyone worshipping together
143 to take the communion to the wards from that as the one
144 celebration here but there are difficulties with doing that em
145 there are such prosaic things as the lunch trolley comes round at 12.15 so
146 you have to finish by then and if you start the service too early then that's
147 difficult for patients to get to and objections from the people who've always
148 come at 10.15 and it would obviously be some major trauma to them to
149 change the time (laughs) cos we did try doing that (laughs)
150 um so it's a bit messy and theologically unsatisfactory to me personally
151 but in the end you think 'well my theological peccadillos are
152 less important than getting this done' um so we do it the way we do
153 it um
154 but I would love a situation where we were more able to get the patients
155 who wished to into our chapel to experience worship in that setting
156 for some of them the music would be a real uplift but the
157 reality is very few are actually able to come to chapel most of them
158 do it at the bedside in the best way that we can manage and the best that
159 we could offer
160 so you live with that *yes*
161 and of course there are lots of other things which which could be
162 different that's just one example the kind of Sunday routine
163 which I'm just deeply conscious is not how I would want it to be if I was
164 starting all over again

165 em
166 we I believe quite a poor service to our mental health patients
167 em which is always a matter of regret but to offer a better
168 service would involve a much greater investment of time than the mental
169 health service is willing to pay for and when you're employed by
170 this trust and the mental health service is run by a different
171 trust I can't give them more time without taking away from the needs of the
172 acute hospital which are also both plenty to keep us occupied all day
173 so there's a frustration there um sometimes
174 when I visit over there I find myself very much caught in the tension
175 not of exactly of clock-watching but if someone needs
176 you to be with them for over an hour a day before they open up and you
177 can't give them that I sometimes feel I'm wasting my time being there at
178 all which again is hugely frustrating and not terribly useful to
179 the patient but yeah so there's stuff like that you feel you would love
180 to be different but it's hard to see a way of achieving that within
181 the resources that you have
182
183 *mm do you have enough volunteers*
184
185 mm I suppose one answer would be 'no' because you could always use
186 more (laughter) it's a bit like saying 'have you got enough church
187 members' isn't it but er we have enough to offer a good
188 service and there's only so much you can ask a volunteer to do
189 this morning for example em we haven't got enough
190 volunteers to send one to every ward and on a Friday that's what we
191 aim to do so that every patient who would like one can get at least a
192 brief visit on a Friday we can find out if they have any needs over the
193 weekend and to people of different traditions that can be very
194 important to them to receive communion on Sunday and I can't do
195 them this week cos I've not got enough volunteers today but if
196 they all turned up I might struggle to know what to do with them
197 because I might have too many but that's how it is with

198 volunteering they're very committed but they're allowed to go on
199 holiday don't have to ask my permission when they're not fined for
200 going in term time you know (laughs) so you kind of have the things
201 particularly through the summer where you struggle but on the whole
202 we have enough to do roughly what we want to do
203 em we could use more volunteers in a different way if we had more
204 voluntary time we could offer some of our wards that have long-stay
205 patients a different type of visit because I know that a number of them are
206 crying out for someone who would visit a person who has no visitors
207 which would be a very different pattern and would mean popping in
208 for half an hour every day that they're here as opposed to you know 'I
209 always come on a Friday morning' or 'I always come on a Wednesday' which
210 is mostly the pattern for our volunteers and I have kind of
211 floated that idea to some but you don't find many people who say 'yeah I
212 could come to the hospital every day at 4.30 or 2 o'clock' it's just it's too
213 big a chunk of time for most people or too regular a commitment
214 because as always you get people who are committed to lots of
215 other things
216 so yeah we could do with more people to do different things but whether
217 that's realistic I don't know
218
219 *I wonder what's what do you think might help work towards some of*
220 *these improvements that you are what could perhaps other*
221 *people do*
222
223
224 I think as a chaplaincy team we could have better relations with a wider
225 number of local churches we have very good support from a
226 number that historically are interested in chaplaincy or have
227 developed an interest or we've got a few volunteers who've become very
228 enthusiastic and feed it back into their church life and I did have
229 the ambition when I came here to preach around the bay (laughs) and
230 then I realized I could be here 10 years and not get round them all cos

231 a certain number of Sundays I'm here in the hospital so I don't have every
232 free Sunday to give in that way and even doing it every other week it
233 doesn't there are too many
234 um I could perhaps be more forceful in encouraging the rest of my
235 team to do that but they're very busy as well but I think we would at
236 that we could decide perhaps to have a real push on that for a
237 year or something and try and tout ourselves around the churches cos you
238 only develop relationships when you visit you know some of the
239 churches we get really good support from in prayer as well as other ways
240 other ones where I've been to a women's meeting or taken a Sunday
241 service it's that personal *it is* thing that makes all the
242 difference and we could do more of that I'm as guilty as anyone
243 of when I've had a long day at the hospital I'm quite glad to get
244 home and not go and speak to a meeting at the church in the evening
245 when I've got a Sunday off it's really nice not to have to prepare a
246 sermon yes (laughs)
247
248 but yeah we could definitely do better with that we could
249 possibly haven't thought this one through Kathryn *oh it's alright*
250 you've prompted me to new ideas but you know
251 within our volunteer team there are people who are very capable
252 lay preachers and local preachers of various denominations I could
253 probably get them fired up to do a hospital thing and again raise
254 awareness of what we do here how local churches could support us
255 and how we could support them more effectively cos I think that there is
256 a lot of scope for better interaction there's some sort of
257 there's a level of frustration with bureaucracy of course and confidentiality
258 rules *yeah* in that one of the ways we could work together much more
259 effectively would be patients who are discharged who value chaplaincy
260 support here but don't have a local church to have some kind of a support
261 network when they're discharged home but of course there's no way
262 you can refer someone to any particular church without their
263 specific permission that they wish that to happen um and it's

264 very difficult for me even when they say 'is there a good local church near
265 me' I'm thinking 'OK so I have to give them a choice *yeah* I
266 can't say 'actually where you live the Anglicans are much better than
267 anyone else' that's not fair so I have to just simply inform them of
268 what local churches are available just leave the ball very much in their
269 court and you're kind of feeling half the time well a lot of the time
270 absolutely nothing will happen as a result but you know
271 *yeah* there's a frustration there *yeah*
272 but I don't I suppose it sounds very corny but you know what
273 else can you do but pray because in terms of your professional ethics
274 and what you're allowed to do there's actually very little you can do
275
276 *yes what about support of denominations I mean you are formally*
277 *a member of Synod*
278 *yes*
279 *how might that be better*
280 it would be better if I managed to stop arranging my weekend on the same
281 day as Synod (laughs) which I'm really sorry I keep doing that because I have
282 a pattern I usually forget I usually do the second weekend of the month
283 and then I think 'oh dear that's Synod again' em so I
284 could do better Kathryn I could do better em just to make links
285 with colleagues and to just be there I read all the stuff but I'm
286 not very good at attending and this then sounds like a really pointless
287 thing to say but if there was a unit that was less wide than the entire
288 South West it would be so much easier to relate to people
289 em when we had District Councils I hated them my wife would
290 tell me I was always in the worst mood of the week when I came home from
291 District Council cos they drove you nuts with what they never achieved
292 however now I miss them because what they did do was give you
293 a locus for local prayer fellowship and information and we don't have that
294 any more and it's almost impossible for me to find out what's going on
295 in local churches beyond the ones that I happen to have a personal

296 link with and that's a shame but I'm not suggesting we reinstate
297 District Councils (laughs)
298 *well we're trying with Areas to do something a bit more local*
299 and again clergy groups um I would happily go to something in []
300 if I could but to the best of my knowledge there's nothing to go to and
301 if there is they haven't invited me or told me about it so I'm out of the
302 loop
303
304 *when I did my research before on ministry outside the pastorate there was a*
305 *particular complaint of chaplains that they weren't seen as part of the*
306 *normal clergy and again that you might be expected to go to Synod*
307 *but was there anything related to your particular ministry there*
308 *it's a two-way thing*
309 it is a two-way thing but I want to resist very strongly that trap of
310 blaming the Synod or the structure because actually it's not it's
311 mainly my fault I need to be very clear about that if I
312 my diary was more organized I could make sure I was free
313 and I could go
314
315 *yes and what about the political side*
316 those were eyebrows for the benefit of the tape raising my eyebrows
317 what do you mean by that
318 *well you mentioned the whole business that you longed to do better work*
319 *with the mental health unit but the funding won't allow do you see is*
320 *that an ideological decision or is it a political decision do you think*
321 *the funding*
322
323 politics come into everything *yes em the mental health is the*
324 *Cinderella service always has been and whenever a politician*
325 makes an issue of it in a positive way as they do from time to time to
326 give them credit the reality very seldom follows on from it
327 of any real improvement so it's not just chaplaincy

328 to give you an example which hit the national headlines – we had a
329 case in Torbay about six months ago of a young girl 15 who was kept in
330 a police cell – not just overnight but for several days because there was
331 nowhere else for her to go – and that hit the headlines and Jeremy
332 Hunt said it was unacceptable

333

334

335 *(There was a knock at the door and the recording was paused, while a*
336 *conversation took place. The recording device would not continue recording*
337 *afterwards so the remainder of the conversation is written up from notes*
338 *taken down at the time.)*

339

340

341

342 *You were talking about politics and mental health . . .*

343

344 Yes, there was a case that made the national press.

345 A young girl, about 15, was held in a police cell for 5 days, because there
346 was nowhere else for her. She had been behaving inappropriately as a
347 patient – there are no mental health beds for children and so she had been
348 in a general children’s ward and was deemed a danger to the other patients.
349 [Jeremy Hunt – then Secretary of State for Health – got involved, but it’s all
350 gone quiet again.

351

352 The provision for mental health in general is inadequate and the cost of
353 chaplaincy is a drop in the ocean, compared to what is really needed in
354 total. And what is needed is consistent funding – not the situation we have
355 now where children with mental health problems have to go to
356 Birmingham, because they have beds there. Chaplaincy is a long way down
357 the list of essentials – though I believe it does do good.

358

359 *Is your model of ministry based on your image of God?*

360

361 My image of God is closely related to the life and work of Jesus Christ. In
362 him God comes close to God's people. It's a fairly traditional model – God
363 manages to reach us. That is a model for ministry.

364 In Jesus Christ's life, we see a good model in the way he treats people. Not
365 just the healing, but having affinity with them. They want to talk to him and
366 he talks to them, makes himself available.

367 It is about living a life of faithfulness, filled with love, openness, prayer – for
368 the gifts and qualities that make ministry effective.

369

370 I had a lovely bit of feedback recently from a nurse who said, 'We do like
371 your visits to the ward, because everything is always so peaceful when
372 you've gone' and I don't think that's just to do with my nature.

373 It's to do with trying to be like Jesus – pro-active and an involved God. God
374 goes out of his way to be with us and so do we.

375

376 I was given some advice a very long time ago from an older minister, who
377 said ' You love your people and they will love you.'

378

379 So in short – no there's no particular Bible passage, but the whole thing. I
380 read the Bible through when I first became a Christian in my early teens and
381 then did it again cover to cover. And it's complicated – it doesn't always
382 agree with itself –that's why we have to work with it. Interpretation is
383 important.

384 It's part of the graciousness of God that he used human vessels to write it,
385 different kinds of people in different times and so wants us to use our minds
386 to interpret what is said for our time. God inspires us, working in
387 partnership, to understand.

388

389 *It's like that hymn 'Take my life' that talks of the intellect . . .*

390 Yes. We are made in God's image and our minds and brains are part of that
391 creation and we are creative in our turn, through art and music and so on.

392 *And music can say so much more than words at times.*

393 Yes. I often go into the chapel here – which has a lovely stained glass
394 window – and find someone sitting there just looking at the window. And
395 often they will tell me what they see there . . .

396

397

398 Back to the connection with Synod – I feel enormous affection and gratitude
399 to the URC. They trained me and supported me and I feel I should be giving
400 something back.

401 Why not ask chaplains to offer oversight to a small congregation, rather
402 than stretching a pastorate minister even thinner?

403

404 *I do feel that chaplains have something to offer the wider church in offering*
405 *ways of talking about faith, or rather having faith talks with people.*

406 Exactly so. I went into chaplaincy because I wanted to reconnect with
407 people on the fringe of the church and felt I did not have the opportunity in
408 the pastorate.

1

2 APPENDIX 3f

3 Contextual Bible Study, Elders (CBS/E)

4

5 The session, with four elders, began with an explanation of how the texts
6 were chosen and an introduction to the CBS method. The group chose the
7 story of Lydia from Acts 16, which was read through twice.

8

9 The recording did not start promptly, so the discussion begins a few minutes
10 in.

11

12 (unclear) that was my first thought as well I was picturing them as
13 backpacker what my son is doing now (laughter) so er I was imagining
14 yea yea that's what they were doing and it sounds like a busy place because
15 they wanted to go and find a quiet place to pray cos it was the Sabbath so
16 they went outside the city outside the gate beside the river to find
17 a beautiful place to pray

18 er you sort of getting a picture of them all sitting sitting on rocks by the side
19 of the river (general agreement) very sort of rural perhaps
20 the women there were gathered there because they were doing the
21 washing maybe on the Sabbath yes the Sabbath if it was
22 the Sabbath then they shouldn't be doing anything should they but it
23 depends doesn't it I don't know were women allowed to do anything
24 (unclear)

25 if they weren't Jewish it wouldn't matter would it the Sabbath
26 wouldn't mean anything to them the worship of God yes should
27 be the worshipper of God that's interesting because it suggests she
28 might be was a Greek Jew some sort of convert you know if she was a
29 worshipper of God not gods yea

30 what about you M what was your first em I'm trying to
31 make something out of it really I'm probably looking for something
32 what did you hear what did you hear well I heard
33 travelling around these places and going to this city and um

1 as you said it was a busy place and on the Sabbath they've
2 gone outside the gates to um to pray and so on and they and this
3 unknown lady but wealthy em was listening to them and then
4 um that's what I'm hearing and I'm trying to make some
5 sort of sense out of it I'm trying to get um when we
6 got to that last sentence and I hadn't actually read it but I heard it
7 being said and she prevailed upon us I was waiting for the next bit to
8 come what happens now and it didn't (laughs)
9 um so I'm what did it mean by prevailing mm yea I
10 need to yes no I wan't to know a bit I feel that I want to know a bit
11 more somehow I think the implication in the
12 prevail is that she she succeeded she said come and stay and they
13 did and they did oh right so they (unclear) faithful
14 worthwhile yea mm
15 I tell you what keeps (unclear) me is that they spoke to the women
16 it's the women who gathered there is it because it was
17 outside the gate don't know where the women were allowed to
18 gather where were the men cos if it was the Sabbath they wouldn't be
19 working would they they'd be worshipping wouldn't they they'd
20 be worshipping OK inside the gate but where were they and why
21 separately yea I've been to a Reform synagogue but I
22 think in some very strict ones cos you know if you go to the em the
23 western wall there's the bit that only men can go into in the temple
24 there were parts that only men could go to so it could well be that this was
25 where that the women were used to worshipping separately like they
26 do in the Jewish synagogues women sit separately and the men are down
27 there yes they've already been in the city some days so
28 they've purposely gone out on the Sabbath haven't they is that because
29 to look were they going to are they looking for a place to pray
30 or are they looking for people gathering so they can preach to them
31 oo and were the women expecting them and maybe
32 I'm missing something here because we keep on we start out with
33 we set sail we did this who is we who are who is it

1 we're talking about well who is we well who
 2 are we there's Paul clearly and of course it's written by Luke Acts is
 3 written by Luke so there's an assumption it sounds as if
 4 he was there um I could go and get my commentary but if
 5 you look further back I think it's Paul and Barnabas at this point I don't
 6 think it's Timothy I think it's Paul and Barnabas that are traveling together
 7 em interesting of course that the women are
 8 happy to listen to these three men
 9 they must have had they must have had a good manner about
 10 them (general agreement) and did they go there with the intention of
 11 speaking to the women yes because they supposed there was
 12 a place of prayer there at the place and they (unclear) must have
 13 looked for somewhere (general agreement) (unclear voice)
 14 or was it just women that gathered there a lot of people there
 15 and they just decided to speak to the women there's all sorts of
 16 questions that come to mind here I know it's a city but these are three
 17 strangers in the city would they would the people be aware that these
 18 are strangers in the city or is it too big are they I mean would
 19 they know that they were not from that city how big is it accent would do
 20 it wouldn't it I mean you know and the dress would the dress be any
 21 different I don't know I wouldn't have thought so Philippi
 22 was a very busy and quite sort of multi-cultural port right yes
 23 so it's a port so you get people from they'd be used to
 24 used to people who looked a bit different right and how did
 25 Lydia come to be there when she was from Thyatira yeah where she's not
 26 not a local person she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer
 27 in purple cloth (unclear) a certain woman pass me your Bible
 28 (unclear background voices) where it is I've got a map in the Bible
 29 she wasn't from Philippi was she so what was she doing there
 30 selling cloth or but she had a house there didn't she
 31 oh yes so maybe she married someone from that region (group
 32 looks at maps in the Bibles) oh Thyatira it's actually quite a long way
 33 it's in the middle of Turkey (shows the map) that's a long way away

1 a long way it is a long way so she may have moved
2 she's obviously moved there cos they don't go back there he stays
3 in Troas isn't on here but Neapolis is from Neapolis a
4 straight course to Samothrace oh yes Troas is here (looking at map)
5 so they've come from where she is (further discussion looking at
6 map) if they'd gone south they would have come to her
7 I wonder if the fact that she wasn't local is relevant mm cos she's
8 a stranger well it depends you don't know she could have
9 been there years and years and years we've no idea how old she was
10 but is it one of those places where you have to have been conceived
11 there to be considered local (laughter) say maybe she was married to
12 somebody from that area and that's when she moved or maybe the
13 dealings in the purple cloth led her to that particular place because her city
14 was inland her town wherever it was whereas this is on the
15 coast isn't it so if she was a dealer in purple it would make
16 more sense to be on the coast
17 but if you look at the whole multi-cultural aspect of it it is a Roman
18 colony it's in Greece it's a Roman colony you've got this
19 you've got one of the dealers who's from Thyatira if that's how
20 you say it don't quote me um because it was a trading place
21 and that's that's sort of er interesting place and you're right
22 purple is all is expensive because it's kings it's the royal colour
23 but the fact that she was then baptised so she was
24 committed then oh yes and she not only her but her whole
25 household was baptised would that be because she tells them
26 to was she powerful enough oh yeah I would think so
27 they wouldn't have much choice although if she was a Christian
28 person they might see that there would be some advantage because if she
29 was if she's going to be a follower of Jesus and live in that way
30 it's got to have a benefit for them I think em
31 Paul I mean Paul he does keep talking about how people should
32 treat each other it's not in the letter to the Philippians but you
33 know he tells them they have to treat their slaves properly so they

1 can still have slaves but they've got to treat them properly I'm also I
2 just fascinated what was it that he said that appealed so much
3 because there's a difference from what people say to when he I
4 mean he writes these great theological letters it's not it can't
5 be how he talked but maybe because it's predominantly women
6 we assume or all women that he was talking to em he talked about
7 their role as women and how important they can be to the church
8 and to Christianity and following Jesus and how Jesus took in
9 anybody and women were just as important as men because in those times
10 women weren't important I mean that part of the world they're
11 still not are they I think he probably appealed because they were just
12 as important as everybody else I've just been reading before that
13 that's alright and he had a vision to go Paul had had this vision
14 so he was told to go to this place to Macedonia oh yes (unclear)
15 and I think Timothy was it Timothy goes with Paul and
16 Silas reading the chapter after while beforehand he was in Troas he
17 had this vision to go to Macedonia so (unclear) so they set off
18 the other thing of course is that he wouldn't have the reputation that he
19 had over in Antioch and places like that who would have known that he
20 was he was an arch villain at one time (laughs) he would just
21 come over as somebody
22
23 this is I mean one of the things about baptism is there is an assumption
24 some of us assume that it means that all the children were baptised
25 as well if the head of the household is baptised because there
26 are those the ones who argue that believers' baptism is the only
27 because there's no children's baptism in in the scriptures but I'm
28 not sure that sounds to me like everybody goes and yeah
29 how big was the household you know was it her and her
30 children plus the slaves servants or was it aunties and uncles
31 yea how big was the household they all lived together
32 oh yea but and the other thing you were talking about
33 them being brave is they did go without any idea where they

1 were gonna stay a bit like backpackers then (general
2 agreement) did they have any money anywhere they could find
3 no they didn't take money Paul did at various places
4 practise his tent-making at times to earn money but
5 let's face it though there wouldn't have been any five star hotels
6 would there (laughter) but in that sort of area they were used to
7 putting up people anyway weren't they it's not like us the fact
8 that she actually invited them to her household it must be the done
9 thing because we wouldn't invite strangers into our house no
10 they're very hospitable people aren't they they James my son
11 he was an archaeologist went to Egypt and they were
12 working with these people in the he was working in the em museum
13 there and somebody from there invited them for a meal to
14 the house and they were all given food and then the host retreated and
15 they were all served he didn't sit down with them he served them
16 they were all served their food and everything but he didn't sit down
17 with them and er which I thought was quite strange but they you
18 know they welcomed them into the home and they fed them but they
19 didn't sit down with them but they are they invite anybody don't they
20 cos I know my nephew used to work with asylum seekers and they
21 had nothing some of these people he said as soon as you sat down they
22 were offering you food and I said they didn't have much to start
23 with but they would take it as an affront if you didn't take their food
24 so I think generally that area they are very hospitable people
25 and they don't think twice about inviting anybody into their home
26 and serving them as you say they prevailed upon us
27 they would give you works when you got there yea I
28 mean they do she does it's not a spoiler but she does seem to
29 set up if you like the beginnings of a church at Philippi around her what
30 happens next you've got it open I haven't read it its' alright
31 what happens next you've probably it's the story of a slave girl who
32 keeps prophesying and her owners make money out of her and Paul
33 because she says I recognise I know who you are you're a

1 man of Jesus Paul tells her Paul says the devil to come out of her
2 cos that's what they thought and her owners were a bit
3 cross because they were earning a nice little packet from her going round
4 telling fortunes and they get thrown in prison and they are they do
5 escape from prison but it says at the end of that that they go back to Lydia's
6 house so she's still there is that there's something the beginnings
7 of something there um but sheshe must be she's hospitable
8 she's got the wealth to be hospitable I think um and
9 there is something here about the fact that it is the women it's one of the
10 very few ones cos so often it's the men he talks to it's one of the
11 few where he does and I can tell you this was chosen by a
12 woman (laughter) um lay preacher down Taunton way
13 and she like it um what she liked it because it was about the
14 sort of gathering and eating together and sharing faith in that way is er
15 could the women have been part of her household as well could have been
16 yes it says spoke to the women who were gathered there and a certain
17 woman named Lydia so er they could have been part of her
18 household yes I wonder what they did in the city
19 before then cos it says we remained in the city for some days and then on
20 the Sabbath we went outside on the gate by the river so
21 perhaps he's just not been as successful elsewhere yea it's just one of
22 those things where he's er well yes that's where maybe he needed to
23 pray cos they needed guidance
24
25
26 it doesn't sound though as if necessarily they were preaching they
27 could have just been talking between themselves and she was listening in
28 on the conversation
29
30 and it's not just well it's not just Paul that's doing the talking is it
31 cos it says listening to us (general agreement)
32 makes me think they're in a huddle talking and she's listening in thinking
33 oh that sounds an interesting conversation well what did

1 they say that converted cos there's nothing about the conversion here
2 is there no perhaps she was a worshipper of God already
3 she opened her heart to us eagerly Paul it was said like Paul there
4 she was being preached to by Paul rather than the other two wasn't
5 she opened her heart eagerly to what was said by Paul and then
6 it just says she was baptised so what was what did have what
7 had he said that had converted her if you like to being a Christian
8 because they hadn't gone there to preach had they no
9 they'd gone there to pray that's true I'd not thought about
10 that yes they'd gone there to pray to that place so it sounds as if they
11 were talking to each other and praying and the women were gathered
12 there and Lydia was listening to what they were talking about and then
13 perhaps approached them and then they got talking did they ask to
14 be baptised there and then and was it the act of being baptised or was it
15 just on the basis of being baptised that she asks if you have judged me
16 to be faithful to the Lord em I'm trying to put those two together
17 and make some sort of sense out of those so did she ask to be baptised
18 there and then on the through what she heard and was
19 she being asked to be judged as faithful on that basis because she'd
20 welcomed them into her home do you mean no er on the fact that she'd
21 gone and listened and asked Oh could I become a Christian baptise me
22 and on the basis of that was she asking to be judged to be faithful
23 I'm just trying to I'm struggling with this if you judge me
24 to be faithful to the Lord come and stay in my home so she invited
25 them she's being hospitable or has she invited them because she
26 wants to know more by staying with her several days she will get to know
27 more it doesn't have to be at the same time that she was baptised
28 though does it no the Lord opened up her heart to listen eagerly to
29 what was said by Paul when she and her household were baptised it might
30 not have been the same day it could have been later so she'd
31 perhaps listened to Paul over several sessions then they became
32 decided to be baptised and then she invited them into her
33 home this is why I think the Bible has great big gaps (laughter) and it's also

1 somebody's translation yes (general agreement) you can't take it
2 as word for word can you no no no it's somebody's interpretation
3 and his memory and his memory yes cos the other thing is baptism
4 would need the river cos they're by the river (general agreement) it
5 could have been at the time actually but could it have been like a Billy
6 Graham type come forward oh yea (unclear) he could
7 have been there all day (laughs) talking and then deciding alright
8 well we'll be baptised now and come to my house it's getting dark
9 now what're you struggling with M it's um if you have
10 judged me to be faithful well you know to judge
11 somebody whether they've been faithful or not you've got to have
12 something on which to judge them it's that what was it that
13 perhaps the fact that she asked to be baptised yea
14 she's fully committed then isn't she I say now I want to be
15 baptised I'm fully committed to Jesus and and to God
16 and so by doing this do you judge me to be a faithful women
17 yes but had Paul been there before because baptism would
18 have been quite alien to them wouldn't it so had the
19 Christians been there before there 's no indication this is the first
20 time he talks about (unclear) maybe he's been talking about that and that
21 was the attraction maybe he could have been saying about er
22 (unclear) baptism sort of adult baptism but to them it
23 would be totally alien wouldn't it
24 but perhaps the fact that you could become a new person appealed to them
25 with being fully immersed in the river you go in and come out
26 a fresh person she probably thought that sounds really good I'd like
27 to have a go at that had she been naughty beforehand well perhaps as
28 a dealer well yes you might not always be totally honest
29 you don't become rich always by being totally honest in those
30 days and to be a woman and to be well-off she was told the fact that she
31 was told she would be forgiven you know any sins and whatever
32 she goes well that sounds like a good idea I'll start again now
33 (unclear) (laughter) this sort of er has this got some sort

1 of parallel to Zacchaeus well I don't know could do couldn't it
2 maybe she had done some bad dealings and she thought
3 she had a conscience she's heard er what Paul had had to say
4 on forgiveness and what have you and and then thought I'd
5 like to start again or she could have been faithful to God beforehand
6 because it did say she was a worshipper of God and judge me to
7 be faithful to the Lord
8 had she been a good Christian woman without being a Christian she
9 could have been a worshipper of God but not necessarily a Christian
10 and that 's what she wanted to be would she be a good person
11 there were plenty of people who were worshippers of God who
12 were still fiddling people so (laughter) um she probably wanted a
13 fresh start as I say because she was baptised and that give her the
14 opportunity to be forgiven and start again and be honest in all her
15 dealings for a change I suspect if this all happens at that one time
16 then the household is her relations rather than staff cos they probably
17 wouldn't be there they'd be doing their own thing um so we're
18 talking about her could be daughters aunts sisters motherwell they
19 were all very close weren't they usually family ties especially if they
20 weren't married so it would be unmarried sister or unmarried
21 aunt possibly because they used to others would have gone with
22 their husbands kind of thing that's the other thing about it
23 she's the dealer in purple cloth isn't she yea it doesn't say
24 that she's got a husband do we know she's married no (unclear)
25 she's the dealer not the wife of the dealer she's the dealer
26 (general agreement) she's the one with all the dosh
27 but it isn't I mean Luke's mentioned women before in the em gospel
28 he's the one who mentioned the ones who financed Jesus'
29 ministry mission ministry it's the first time Mary
30 Magdalene's mentioned and there's the wife of somebody who works
31 for em Pilate I think and there are one or two Susannah I think is one
32 and I can't remember but it's in Luke 8 and he names some women
33 so there clearly was a role for women in some sense at a

1 certain stratum of society obviously to have their own wherewithal
2 um and this in another one of them
3 we don't know enough about the life of women particularly cos the
4 history that's written is always all about the ruler isn't it so we have to
5 work it all out from archeology
6
7 but going back to the hospitality thing is that's the um I think that's the
8 important bit it's that welcome isn't it
9
10 that was part of the culture as well though wasn't it but she
11 welcomes them back after they've caused a huge stir in Philippi and
12 been in prison and she still welcomes them back
13
14 cos there yea I think there would have been a bit of a stir (laughs)
15 with these rich men suing them maybe that again leads to the fact that
16 she hasn't got a husband o it could do yea she's a strong
17 character because she's an emancipated woman and she
18 can please herself she doesn't have a husband to argue with does she
19 about what she's doing
20 sounds like she makes all the decisions my house her house
21 and her household not her husband's household it's her
22 household
23 when I did I did a women's studies course in the Open University
24 years and years and years ago and in a certain
25 at a certain period in history round about middle ages up to
26 Victorian times actually women if they were widowed between
27 them being widowed and their sons reaching majority was the most
28 independent time for them because they had control once their sons
29 reached an age when they could control everything then they lost it
30 again and women tended not to remarry men usually remarried
31 straight away mainly to have somebody to look after the children
32 but it was that was a period when women actually had a bit of
33 bit of independence and a bit of power (laughs)

1
2
3 I like the sound of this woman you do (laughter) you
4 know why I chose her now don't you is this because you want to go down
5 by the river no I think just sounds like a very independent a very
6 (unclear) cos she there can't have been many people round
7 there that she you know it's not as if her friends have become Christians
8 they hadn't been there before she's not following the
9 majority of people is she no she's thinking for herself
10 this would have been the first time they got the message about
11 Jesus as the Christ I mean because they were a port there may have
12 been they may have heard stories about things that had gone on but to
13 actually get the full story as they did from Paul it would be the first
14 time so it is quite a step um to decide that this is how it's going to
15 be this the the way this is how you're going to live your life
16 as it were and it's er it's something that's very hard for us
17 to I think to get that sort of the newness of it all
18 I went to Taiwan and it's interesting because the percentage of
19 Christians there is about the same as here except that it's grown to that if
20 you see what I mean cos the culture I mean alright it's about Victorian
21 missionaries who took Christianity over but still it's still it's still a
22 newish thing in a way whereas we've got so used to it being that's
23 what it is um and I wonder how many people there are around
24 now for whom actually it is new again because of that gap between
25 the ones you know generation two generations not going to church
26 and not as much I mean they get Bible stories at school I
27 know people say they don't they don't get any Bible stories I don't think
28 that's true is it well I don't deal much with it in the class but yea they do
29 they do you still get Bible story books still have Bible stories
30 (unclear) children still get a Christmas story book and
31 Noah's ark I was going to say and Noah's ark she enjoyed the story
32 oh did she what was that about it was the lost sheep
33 did she cry no she sat very still I just the question is

1 you're all elders can you see any connection with being an
2 elder with Lydia what's going on there
3 well she actually brought her household to be baptised I can't honestly
4 say that I've brought anybody to the church to be baptised brought
5 anybody to the church full stop except your children yea but they've
6 left (long confused section)
7 but they haven't stayed in the church and they were baptised as children
8 but they were never made members mine are the same and I
9 don't think I've brought anybody to church I think over the years
10 (unclear) like you come and J came but J's disappeared and
11 people sort of come in and have gone off so nobody's committed
12 but she she did but again we don't know whether they stayed
13 do we no so they were all brought to baptism so you can't
14 control people's thoughts afterwards but you can but try and R's coming
15 it's er there is a subtle difference she it says her and her
16 household there's a bit of authority here isn't there I suppose they
17 could order people to come couldn't they well the boys come at
18 Christmas because they don't (unclear) with me yea that sort of
19 thing but it is this this em opening up to people
20 to strangers I think is an important thing in this we've all
21 talked about the fact that she's just saying come
22 um now if you took the church as the household no we haven't
23 got anywhere for them to come and stay you know in the buildings that
24 we've got but it's there is something about being open (unclear)
25 we had those those men staying (unclear) they stayed in the
26 church they slept in the church in the Sunday School and (unclear)
27 our kitchen didn't they they put hot tea cups on and marked we'd
28 only just had the kitchen done that's a man thing (laugh)
29 who was that I don't know where they'd come from oh was it
30 a thousand men of a thousand miles they were walking
31 round oh men's march yes I've heard about that and AJ it
32 was during AJ's time and they stayed in the church for about 3 or 4 nights
33 and we'd just had the kitchen done literally(unclear) I just remember

1 them being there yes (unclear) I don't think we ever met did we
2 or was it or maybe I was at work I worked no I
3 don't think they actually did anything for the church it was just they
4 were in the area (unclear) but it wasn't in our houses it was in
5 the building perhaps (unclear) how often do we talk to other people who
6 don't go to church about God and about Jesus and about the church
7 how often if they gathered there how often did they talk to
8 other people about what they believed but that's how they
9 communicated in those days we don't sit round talking but we
10 do talk to people you go out with your friends for meals and things
11 don't you but what do you talk about your beliefs and things it's a
12 subject that people find a bit touchy don't they and so how confident
13 are we about talking about our beliefs and our religion
14 to other people I mean it must have been just as touchy a
15 subject then as it is now more so because they weren't Christian
16 you know it doesn't say perhaps it was a dangerous thing even
17 then cos it's a Roman colony she's living in and it just says she's a
18 worshipper of God so the fact that she was a worshipper of God living in
19 a Roman colony was she already going against the tide
20 it's interesting that they had a ladies league or women's fellowship
21 (laughter) that's what it sounds like gathered by the river
22 on a Sunday or was it the ladies' bright hour in one church it was called
23 they all had funny names
24 and those those have almost died out now the women's meetings
25 that used to be well the Beehive started as an afternoon group really
26 well it was an evening do but before that we had the women's
27 fellowship or whatever in the afternoon the women's circle
28 women's circle your mum was in it women's circle on a
29 Thursday afternoon oh that was the women's circle ladies league
30 (unclear) go out to work ladies circle five years ago not that
31 long ago they kept going oh yes we found D's account yes
32 that's right because women didn't go to work they were available in the
33 afternoon you know to do these things and then the Beehive sort of

1 took over didn't it because it was an evening thing and all the
2 women who worked could go in the evening and it was for younger
3 women wasn't it it was it was the women's circle was full of old
4 women our age but they were old no disrespect to you mum
5 oh no but it was that generation wasn't it she enjoyed it when
6 she retired on a regular basis anyway yes so you're talking about
7 being 60 around that age oh yes cos I remember the ladies' league here
8 asking why don't any of the younger ones come cos the children have
9 got to be picked up from school while you're still in here well I
10 think this was about 2 till 4 something like that yes and I think there
11 was a bit of dissatisfaction to start with that H wouldn't be the president
12 because Mrs C had been but she was working (laughter)
13 but it's that sort of meeting has has sort of faded in the
14 way that it was with a very sort of formal with a bit of devotion at the
15 beginning and a speaker and a cup of tea served properly in cups
16 and Ladies Sunday used to be them as well yes and they
17 were the ones that used to organise the Women's World day of Prayer
18 but those groups aren't there so much any more either so it's that's
19 changed a bit (unclear) well I feel it's cheating in a way it's not
20 why is it cheating well well this is what I go to when I
21 don't understand what I'm reading there does it say it any
22 different in the message I use it sometimes when CR comes
23 to preach he and his wife always read from it
24
25 (unclear mumbling) it's verse 11 right
26 (unclear) at 16 shall I read it yea go on putting out from
27 the harbour at Troas we made a straight run for Samothrace the next
28 day we tied up at new city and walked from there to Philippi the main city in
29 the part of Macedonia and even more importantly a Roman colony
30 we lingered there several days on the Sabbath we left the city
31 and went down along the river where we heard there was to be a
32 prayer meeting we took our place with the women who had gathered
33 there and talked with them one woman Lydia was from Thyatira and

1 dealer in expensive textiles known to be a God-fearing woman as she
2 listened with intensity to what was being said the Master gave her a
3 trusting heart and she believed after she was baptised along with
4 everyone in her household she said in a surge of hospitality if you're
5 confident that I am in this with you and believe in the Master truly
6 come home with me and be my guests erm we
7 hesitated but she wouldn't take no for an answer (laughter) that's a
8 much better clearer interpretation and it's quite different in lots of
9 ways isn't it yes yes a different twist on it but I love that
10 wouldn't take no for an answer that one or this one its
11 the Message is a paraphrase it's not an actual translation but
12 you can't say that what he's saying there isn't that it's a slightly
13 different twist on it like the last bit what did you say there
14 she wouldn't take no for an answer she prevailed upon us
15 we hesitated but she wouldn't take no for an answer you see
16 in this one the Good News it says and she persuaded us to go exactly
17 the same it's that word prevail yes persuaded us to go (laughs) I
18 love that bit but she wouldn't take no there was something
19 that says and if you believe that I am in this with you one of
20 you sort of thing (agreement) see they knew it was a place
21 for bible study prayer meeting prayer meeting yes (unclear)
22 place for prayer was it actually a prayer meeting going on
23 yea well we're making perhaps assumptions there God-
24 fearing woman mm I notice there's no mention of purple
25 just expensive textiles which means the same thing really
26 well the thing is when Luke's writing this when he writes
27 purple cloth people know yes but these days whereas these days it
28 could but you see I also see it worship of God is different from God-
29 fearing well yea I've always thought that as well God-
30 fearing is almost you go to church because you're frightened fearing
31 you've got to go cos otherwise you might go to hell (unclear)
32 rather than going to worship God it's just the way (unclear)
33 yes but the language thing is um the whole thing about er fear

1 and awe awe and trembling and all of that it's supposed to be
2 er I suppose there's a sense of the majesty of God have you
3 read um Wind in the Willows yes long time ago it's the bit
4 where Ratty takes Mole to see Pan and um there's this
5 whole business about them trembling and he says are you are you afraid of
6 him I'm not afraid of him but no is he safe not safe
7 but I'm not afraid there's something other it's that
8 otherness I think is the thing yes
9 yea
10 we don't worship in public very much do we I mean they're out by
11 the river it's er if
12 there was a prayer meeting going on on the common you think people
13 would walk round (laughter)
14 you don't see it so much now but there used to be people in Chester
15 oh there still is I haven't seen them for ages oh I've seen that
16 there was one there yesterday Tuesday maybe you tend
17 to sort of not avoid him but people walk round him and
18 ignore him don't they but they weren't doing that they
19 were (a little confused) and it was the Sabbath so maybe that's
20 what they did yea because they didn't have a building and of
21 course the weather was always nice yes but it it is a question
22 I mean how do people know now we've got the new
23 noticeboards they know what time the worship is but er we're
24 still not good at leaving the doors open and it's cold (laughter) yea
25 it's suprising actually how people see a shut door and they think
26 they wouldn't even if if you were coming to a church that
27 you knew was er you know you're going in it wouldn't
28 matter to you that you had to open the door no but if you were
29 tentative you wouldn't would you no I think St John's
30 is more welcoming than ours because ours is a big wooden door and you
31 go yes straight in from concrete into the church whereas at St John's you've
32 got at least you can see inside a porch you can see through it
33 yea and plants you feel if you actually went in there and you didn't have the

1 courage to go into the church you could stand outside and listen in that
2 little porch whereas in ours everybody would know that
3 someone's coming cos you'd make a noise and you can see cos
4 there's the windows and the door so you can see in and you know what
5 you're going into whereas perhaps it's a small thing as well but our door
6 is so stiff that unless you know it's stiff you could try it and think it was
7 locked and go away again yes and if I mean yes you'd go in then
8 and end up in the black hole of Calcutta that porch yea we tend
9 to put the porch light of for the service as well (laughs) is the door
10 always closed even when there's somebody on duty the trouble is we
11 you close the door against the cold if we don't close the doors the
12 traffic noise sometimes even with the PA system can drown out
13 that'/vs what I think on Sunday cos C took over doing the vestry
14 while (unclear) the door and he didn't close the doors and I could hear
15 straight away and I thought I'd better close those because of the noise it
16 doesn't half make a noise some yea but it would be nice to leave it
17 open really we could have worship outside in the car park
18 (laughter) well we've got room there could have chairs out on a nice
19 summers day like we used to take the kids out (unclear) EG and we
20 took them out on the field when it was nice weather (unclear)
21 eh have an open service on a Sunday have an open
22 service on a Sunday how many do they get to the open one on a Good
23 Friday in the precinct oh there was about 30 I think
24 is that Cytun was it yes we've never been able to get to that because
25 we're always preparing for a performance of either the Crucifixion or
26 something but in reality I mean it's you don't
27 attract anybody (laughter) no it's just people who are already
28 it's yes because it's reasonably early on a Good Friday
29 and em yea you're not attracting people I don't the
30 people who are there are the ones who are from the churches really
31 yes are the shops open the charity shops weren't no because
32 of it's so there weren't because there aren't at that end there's not

1 that many shops haven't been there for ages so yea it was er
2 (unclear)
3
4 I mean what I've heard from you is particularly about this hospitality and
5 welcoming people
6 um and this sense of wanting to be of listening out to other
7 people cos they were the women were there anyway and
8 Paul's and being open to new ideas
9 cos this whole idea of resurrection and the importance of what's the
10 position of women good news for women in particular in this from
11 Paul I think sometimes we perhaps we need to think a bit more about
12 what the good news is for different people because Paul does
13 speak to Paul speaks to particular groups to get them to understand
14 whereas you know we can tell children that actually Jesus
15 thought they were really important and people should be like them
16 cos he says unless you become like a little child and we
17 can there are different messages for different people at different stages
18 of their life as well I think that are important we tend to think it's
19 one size fits all but I think you can emphasise certain different parts of
20 er faith because it's about who it's about who we are as well
21
22 It's quite a big description of somebody here you know she is an
23 independent trader where she's come from um and the fact that
24 she's got a household there with her that actually she's and the other
25 thing is that she starts something that's how it reads to me
26 she's the first named person at Philippi and there's a whole
27 letter to one of the letters is to Philippians that's them we
28 forget yes sometimes that the letters are to the people that are in Acts
29 yes and it's um I think this is when I it's always
30 deadly if I'm at a quiz and they have a Bible question (laughter)
31 I'm just checking if what I'm going to tell you is right here (laughs)
32 yes it is he does write about he does write to them but its'
33 cos there's a wonderful bit I love it Euodia and Syntiche or

1 however you say it please I beg you try and agree as sisters
2 (laughter) there's obviously something been going on there
3 no it's the one where it's rejoice in the Lord always and again I say
4 rejoice (telephone rings) excuse me (answers but call taken
5 in other room)(unclear) it's got Paul's second and third journeys here
6 I mean the distance they travelled by ship and you know walking
7 well I'm just thinking we're going on this cruise and we'll be having I
8 think for 5 days without passing land that's 5 days at sea and this
9 is on a modern ship yes yes and you're sort of thinking and I
10 know where we're going I think then they just go out well there's
11 something on the television the other night about the new trains that are
12 being build in em Japan and they made a two month voyage to arrive
13 here the trains havethe brand new trains they're going to go from
14 London Paddington to the West country they've been delivering the
15 first batch and they said they've just got here after a two month voyage
16 but at the end of the letter to the Philippians Lydia has
17 started I mean Lydia has started something there because there's
18 a big community and it also says you Philippians know very well that
19 when I left Macedonia in the early days you were the only church to help
20 me the only ones who shared my profits and losses and more than
21 once when I needed help in Thessalonica you sent it to me they've
22 er they've been there's a generosity there that is er started
23 there's quite a small book as well isn't it four pages yes but
24 they must be doing something right or they'd get told off more
25 (laughter) the thing about Paul's letters of course is you it
26 would be lovely to know what the other side was what was going on
27 (unclear) (laughter) a bit like presbytery (laughter)
28 what visitation yes I must do the accounts properly this time
29 yes it's a church that starts with hospitality and generosity and
30 clearly just keeps on and that helps must help it grow I think that's the
31 we were talking I had a church meeting alien thing for
32 EG they don't have them but talking about actually how much
33 you do raise for other places fundraising you know with the coffee

1 and that because there are other churches you know it's only
2 ever themselves that they raises money for and that that can be seen
3 they only want your money I can't bear the you
4 remember there used to be a phase putting thermometers outside oh yes
5 they never reached the top somehow did they but
6 there is something attractive in being hospitable and generous in that way I
7 think that attracts people not just the ones that are in need but
8 it's I think it also translates to a a way of being it's not
9 just about money it's about being open and welcoming
10 so strong woman so you'll remember Lydia then I think it's a nice
11 name as well yea I love that name you don't get Lydias much do you
12 (unclear) I just think it's a nice name there were two Lydias
13 in the youth theatre when M was in here I seem to remember Linda
14 was a name for our generation but I don't think I've ever come
15 across a Lydia a few in school over the years no not any at the moment
16 can't think of anybody Lydia no I was for some time part of a
17 women's group and we used to meet once a year we were all sort
18 of in well we weren't all in leadership in the church actually because M
19 came after a while for various reasons and er we used to meet up
20 once a year and for a long time we met at Castleton Youth Hostel cos it
21 was cheap and after we for some reason we'd ended up doing some
22 form of Bible study and it was Lydia we were looking at and we called
23 ourselves Lydia and the group was called Lydia for but there was
24 also a group called Lydia which was not like us at all it was a very
25 sort of evangelical group (laughs) very sort of conservative evangelical
26 group and when we talked about Lydia occasionally there'd be raised
27 eyebrows you're not in that group are you no that's a different
28 Lydia (laughs) so it's a name that gives you cos there ain't that many
29 women named in the Bible when it comes to it even (unclear) or the wife of
30 don't get there own name very often but it's names that caught on
31 you have Marys and Elizabeths all the way through haven't
32 you every generation whereas (agreement) you don't get
33 Lydias is it Lydia Langrish in the Rivals yes that's right restoration

1 there was a song wasn't there Lydia Lydia by Dean Friedman
2 showing my age now (laughter) I can hear that in my head I
3 like it I could hear that in my head but I couldn't
4
5 I think we've mined it but I think there's I don't think I mean I
6 like this way of doing Bible study yes I could have got my commentary
7 out and we could have got all the details but we know enough I
8 mean look at the maps and you look at the bits before to get some
9 sort of context out of it but ultimately it's what it's saying to
10 you to you now
11 and as a method I think it works but the reason I wanted to do it was to
12 see if one elder chooses it is somebody else going to get something out
13 of it as well and I think you have no I've
14 enjoyed it much more because you've had more opportunity to
15 discuss things just your thoughts whether they're right or wrong rather
16 than like we did before studying something and we didn't really know
17 anything about it did we so and it's answering questions and you've got a
18 list of questions doing a whole chapter and you think oh we've got to
19 go on to the next chapter now cos the times going on where
20 this is just a small piece now I've go more out of this we did it for
21 over an hour an hour and 20 minutes on that little tiny passage
22 and the more you read it the more you see the more you
23 discover actually from it things don't come to mind immediately and
24 then you read it through again and something else appears so yes it
25 was a good passage to pick from this bit not necessarily in the
26 Message but you take (unclear) general from these last two sentences if
27 you like what you see when you come to visit our church come and join
28 us yes like we said on Sunday you know what my little thing was
29 I wish people would come and give us a try because they go
30 oh no I don't go to church and I'm thinking if you don't go to church and
31 you don't try it maybe you've been once and you've been put off
32 and they've just dismissed church because it's a place they don't
33 want to go to I thought we're not aliens or anything like that we're

1 quite (unclear) they don't know what goes on going on church
2 it's not a heavy church it's not a heavy service it's never what I
3 call heavy I think people have got an image of um being preached
4 to and being criticised and being preached to cos they haven't been
5 to a church recently and if they came to listen to K preach they'd be very
6 surprised they'd be pleasantly surprised because it's
7 nothing like that they only see what's on the television don't they
8 the traditional Anglican sermons 20 minutes of hellfire and
9 damnation that's very old-fashioned now isn't it did anyone a
10 few years ago did anyone see that we don't like the arty television but
11 there was a programme called Snowdonia when they went back to
12 the quarrying times in Snowdonia and um they put people
13 through the mill for about a month they had to live as the
14 quarrying people did men went off to quarry to work oh yes I did and the
15 women had to stay at home and do all the cooking on a range and so on
16 and they had to they had to go to chapel on a Sunday and you
17 know M does anyone know MWR yes oh no I was thinking
18 about another M he's a larger than life character do you know
19 him oh yes I do he's the ecumenical officer for the yes he's got
20 what's his surname is it R he's got a pastorate over in C
21 WR yes he's been at our church he was at the rededication of T St
22 he came he's a large chap and he's got a booming voice
23 and they cast him in this programme and he was this hellfire and damnation
24 and everyone was like this ooh (laughs) I think that's the
25 image a lot of people who've not been to church before have what
26 church is going to be like he went round one night as a raid burst his
27 way into these homes and was looking for alcohol right you're not
28 having that and taking it away (laughs) it was it was quite um
29 I mean it was obviously scripted cos it people don't people
30 have very strange ideas sometimes about church and certainly about
31 ministers I can tell you yes but if people had seen that it would put
32 them off but until they've seen it they don't know do they
33 it's not like that at all well the churches I've been to have

1 never been like that we're used to the non-conformist aren't we
2 we're the rebels (laughter) (unclear) dissent we were
3 talking about this earlier today about the Catholics at one end
4 of the spectrum and and those at the other the non-conformists and
5 saying we're effectively the rebels

Personal theological statement

Writing a doctoral thesis means adhering to a certain accepted style, with sufficient referencing and a quasi-forensic approach to language. As my work came in the category of Participant-led Action Research, it was necessary to describe my provenance as a researcher, explaining those experiences that have had the potential to influence my analysis and understanding of the data. I did, however, feel it inappropriate to include my own theological and faith-based understanding and beliefs, though I do acknowledge the part such understanding and beliefs play in my interpretations. It is in response to questions from my examiners that I include this personal statement as an appendix.

I will begin with something of a caveat - this statement is only valid as it is written. Personal theology, it would seem to me, can never really be fixed. It is developed over years: deepening knowledge, new experiences and the growth of understanding all change one's perception. Nor can it be completely defended as can a thesis, as feelings are difficult to reference in any academically acceptable way. Bearing these cautions in mind, I will attempt to write as transparently as possible.

To begin at the beginning - I cannot recall a time when I did not believe in God. I grew up in a Christian (Methodist) household and attended church and Sunday School from a young age and have always felt at home in churches. I have questioned aspects of faith and certain faith statements over the years, but those questions have never completely

destroyed my faith and the sense of the reality of the presence of the divine and that presence as a warm and benevolent reality has never really left me. We were not a particularly 'religious' family with no special practice for us as children other than Sunday School attendance. Faith was simply in the air we breathed at home and it is perhaps significant that I have one brother who is also an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament and another who is a very active lay member of his Parochial Church Council.

What then is my current understanding of God in the world and in my own life? The two are connected. A god who is immortal, invisible, ineffable, as the hymn puts it⁷¹ sounds too despotic or hierarchical for my aging hippy sensibilities. Such a being sounds impersonal and certainly not the *Abba* that Jesus related to, if we remember that this was a diminutive used by children for their father. The God who is an integral part of my life, in whom I live and move and have my being, is both transcendent and immanent: with both eternal qualities and values and a particular relational involvement with humanity collectively and as individuals.

The transcendent qualities and values of God stem from God's creativity and those qualities and values are epitomised by the word 'love'. To love is to value and care for, to defend and support and to grieve when love is not returned or the object of love is no more. God creates and loves God's creation. It is good, in God's eyes (Genesis 1.31). The people created by God are given freedom to choose (Genesis 3.22), but exhorted to choose life (Deuteronomy 30.19), life lived according to God's intention. God's love

⁷¹ *Immortal, invisible, God only wise*, by Walter Chalmers Smith (1824-1908)

is freely given, but God has a special care for those unloved, ignored, exploited or abused by others in creation. According to the prophets, this bias to the poor, as we have learned to call it, is the way God would have God's people behave (Isaiah 58.6-10). The golden thread that runs through both Old and New Testaments is the command to love God and to love neighbours, with Jesus adding that we should love as we love ourselves (Luke 10.26-28). The Bible is an excellent source book, but there is also the empirical evidence of the natural world, made better known to us today through the wonderful camerawork and narrative explanation in the wildlife documentaries of recent decades. We see before our eyes the intricate interconnections of the whole of creation, particularly if we have the humility to see ourselves as just a part of that creation, late comers perhaps, but not the pinnacle. This exploration, illustration and explanation is being taken beyond this earth and we are beginning to appreciate the vastness of creation, a constant reminder of our place in God's love - both significant and insignificant.

This is the meta-narrative - the relationship between creator and creation; but there are other lesser narratives, more detailed relationships between God and individuals, whether the individual is a singular or a collective being. Again illustrated in the Bible are the stories of God's interaction with particular people or particular groups. There are the conversations with the patriarchs - Abraham (Genesis 12.1-3) and Moses (Exodus 33.7-11) in particular - and with the prophets (1 Kings 19) and above all, the relationship between Jesus and God as Father (Matthew 3.17). In these conversations people are called by God to certain futures,

encouraged, sometimes admonished, but always accompanied through life. Then there are the rescue narratives - Hagar and Ishmael are directed to life-saving water in the desert (Genesis 22.17-19); Jacob is set on the path to reconciliation (Genesis 32.22-30); the exiles are brought back to Jerusalem (Ezra 1). These are the qualities - love, choice and relationship - that Jesus especially personifies when he asks of someone in need 'What do you want me to do for you?' (Mark 10.51) Once more the empirical evidence of nature can remind us of the particular care God has for particular situations - the regrowth after apparently devastating fires or earth disturbances, such as earthquakes or eruptions; the way in which species adapt to changed circumstances and evolve in order to survive. Moreover we are beginning to learn how the well-being of the planet and that of humanity are intrinsically, even fatally, interconnected. So-called 'natural' disasters, often the result of human behaviour, can destroy lives literally and metaphorically. On the other hand, those who struggle to live well, if at all, in their present circumstances have not the energy or priority to preserve the earth.

In personal terms this two-level theology of a God who is both transcendent and immanent is a mixture of head knowledge and heart felt. In practice this means that God's calling on my life, my vocation, is personal to me and involves my gifts and talents, my lived and learned experience and my relationship with God, but set within a framework of values and qualities that I can discover in the Bible and in nature, a framework that is there to guide my life and my service, my response to God's call, should I choose to go this way.

The ministry of the people of God, then, derives its source from a calling God: a God who relates to and draws out a response from individuals and sets them to use their particular gifts and knowledge and experience in their own context but within a wider framework, that both informs and supports. This framework is a further outworking of God's discerned purpose and intention and can be a protection against anyone who is tempted to become too dependent on their own resources.

This is also true for a collective of people, come together as church, the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.27). The transcendent Godly values and qualities apply in all places, but in each particular setting they will be applied appropriately to the context, the time and place. The Spirit of God gives gifts to each, but those gifts will differ according to particular circumstances (1 Corinthians 12.7). Paul writes to a number of different churches, but the advice and instruction varies according to local custom and understanding. This is particularly apparent when he speaks of the status of women in the church. In Corinth women may pray or prophesy, though with covered heads (1 Corinthians 11.5), but when he writes to Timothy, he says that women should stay silent (1 Timothy 2.12) and in his list of commendations to the Roman church two-thirds of those named are women (Romans 16). Similarly, the Spirit's letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelations offer individual criticism according to the particular life of the church addressed. So just as each individual in a church plays a different part in the ministry and mission of that church, so each individual local church has a different role to play in the life of the Church as a whole. This is important.

A local church needs to discern its own vocation and go forward in confidence, using the gifts and talents and experience of the members as best it can in its own context. This can be a most liberating experience as I have seen churches become very despondent when the membership declines as the age profile rises and the memories of what 'church' meant 40, 50 and more years ago. We are only called to that which God knows we are capable of. This doesn't mean not stretching ourselves or going for growth, but it does mean looking forward for possibilities and opportunities, rather than looking backwards and feeling we do not have the capacity any longer to be effective and looking to God for direction.

This is the reason I have felt it important to create a theological framework, rather than a simple theological statement. Using the same elements - scripture, tradition, reason and experience - but creating something that offers both an agreed understanding and the flexibility to be adapted to particular situations. It is also the reason I have insisted that this framework be provisional - needing regular reviewing to ensure that it is still coherent and relevant for the changing world, practical - being grounded in the real life experience of ministry practitioners, Biblical - rooted in the Word of God, which connects us not just to the divine creator, but to the tradition and traditions that have gone before us.

I am grateful to my supervisors, reviewers and examiners for making me delve deep and articulate for others that which is so intrinsic to my being and rarely laid out in such a way. In many ways, this is the exercise that I am advocating individuals and congregations carry out when they are exploring the nature of God's calling on their lives.

God, transcendent and immanent, creating and known in creation, met in the person of Jesus the Christ and experienced through the action of the Holy Spirit, is the source of my faith. It is this understanding of the nature of God that informs my approach to URC theology - both its ecclesiology and its theology of ministry. I think it gives me a particular position from which to critique and offer an alternative vision, which both expands the horizon for ecclesiology and ministry as a whole and focusses in on the intimate, local and contextual relationships between God and individuals and God and congregations and holds the two in critical tension. I offer one final caveat. Though I can understand and know God through scripture and the created world and my own experience, I know that that understanding is limited. What this means is that, as Paul says, I see only in part (1 Corinthians 13.12) and others will see a different part. Arrogance has no part to play in this game of theology, only humility that recognises the boundaries of knowledge and experience and respects the understandings of others, different though they may be. Genuine dialogue, open to new learning, may change my perspective but that is the way forward to a more co-operative, peaceful, kinder future that we call the commonwealth, or kingdom, of God.

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The Manual - <https://urc.org.uk/manual.html>