Cardiff University

A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Churchgoers in Rural Wales

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SUMMARY

This study focuses on the beliefs and practices of a group of churchgoers from three congregations in Mid Wales. The theoretical framework selected is that of Astley whose term 'ordinary theology' provides the initial impetus for the work. The research questions focus on the beliefs and expressions of these beliefs by ordinary churchgoers, the origin of their theology and the extent to which these beliefs and practices could be described as an ordinary theology. The review of the literature situates ordinary theology in the area of practical theology and compares and contrasts its features with other related fields such as pew theology, common religion and folk religion. There is also a discussion of theological and religious learning and of the relationship between language and theology.

The empirical study adopts a social science methodology, a phenomenological hermeneutic approach and uses a semi-structured interview as the main research instrument. The findings reveal that the interviewees have firmly held beliefs which for many of them had remained since their childhood; these beliefs find expression in their involvement in church and community life and, in particular in the liturgy and rituals of the Church. There is little evidence of the participants having received any systematic religious education and the findings present some tentative support for the ordinary people in churches having ownership of their own ordinary theology. The concluding chapter presents some recommendations, namely the need for churchgoers to be equipped with a vocabulary and grammar with which to articulate their faith, to be provided with a more coherent programme of religious or theological education and for there to be a forum in which churchgoers can express and develop in their theology. The final chapter also presents some areas for further investigation and argues for a more in-depth analysis of a more tightly defined theological issue.

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed .... (candidate)   Date

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MPhil

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STATEMENT 2

This thesis is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background to the study

This thesis focuses on ordinary members of rural Anglican congregations within the Church in Wales; it seeks insight into the beliefs and practices of those people who regularly occupy the pews, and participate, to varying degrees, in the life and work of their local church. The study explores the reasons behind their attending church, their theological beliefs, expressions of theology and the origin and development of their Christian faith.

The main theoretical framework in which the study is located is the developing area of 'ordinary theology', a term coined by Astley, (2002), but the review of the literature will include other related topics such as pew theology, common religion and folk religion in an attempt to situate the findings of this study in the broader context. One of the research questions is, however, the extent to which the beliefs and practices of regular churchgoers actually constitute a theology at all and the final chapter will attempt to bring the various strands together to arrive at some tentative conclusions.

It may be argued that there is nothing *ordinary* about such theology and that the term is in fact an oxymoron. Ordinary theology, according to Astley is: *the theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those*

believers who have received no scholarly theological education (2002: 1). Astley quotes Hull (1996): *If theology is what goes on in people's lives, we know amazingly little about Christian theology* (cited in Astley, 2002: 1). This remark echoes the findings of Davie who commented *that there is really very little information indeed about the beliefs of ordinary British people and the significance of these beliefs in everyday life* (1994: 6). In responding to such gaps in our knowledge, this small-scale study seeks to present the situation in one small geographical area of the Wales. The subject of this study is the individual within the church, however, rather than the church as an organisation, although on various points these will be indistinguishable and, indeed in some instances the individuals participating refer to the church as a structure rather than their own individually held beliefs. The study will contribute to the debate on ordinary theology and may encourage those in authority in churches across the country to enter into dialogue with their church members to find out what they believe and, together, to map out a journey which will take them further than they have gone hitherto in developing what might be termed a rural ordinary theology. The findings of the study will also have relevance for those involved in Christian education both in schools and within the church context, particularly those involved in providing lifelong learning both for clergy and the laity.

The context is the Church in Wales, *a post-establishment church in a secular society* (Harris and Startup, 1999: 167) at a time when church attendance and membership are in decline (Brierley, 2001, 2005, 2006). In their study of the life and beliefs of the Church in Wales, Harris and Startup found that many in the parish councils and among the laity had difficulty understanding religious concepts. The authors ask the

question that if that particular group has difficulty understanding, what hope remains for those outside the church?

In reviewing studies of religious life in Britain and the West since the mid 20th century, Forster (1995) demonstrates that decline in numbers within the mainstream church might push it to the periphery of society, but the Church nevertheless retains its position as a major social influence. Thus marginalisation does not equate to irrelevance. Forster cites the work of Gilbert (1980) who refers to the so-called post-Christian society as one in which Christianity is marginal but in which:

Some members of such a society continue to find Christianity a profound, vital influence in their lives, but in so doing they place themselves outside the mainstream of social life and culture... They become a sub-culture (Gilbert, 1980: ix, cited in Forster, 1995: xvif.).

This study focuses mainly on those who belong to the Anglican Church in rural Wales; however, lest we conclude that theology is alive and well in the countryside, it is worth noting Forster's (*ibid.*) assertion that relatively recent studies have dispelled the myth of a devout rural population.

The assumption is made in this study that very little is known about what people actually believe and that those who attend church possess untapped riches which provide a fascinating basis for research.

Research questions

The main research questions of the study are as follows:

- What are the main beliefs of ordinary churchgoers?

- How do these churchgoers express their beliefs?

- From where do churchgoers gain their theology and how do they develop in their understanding of what they believe?

- To what extent do these beliefs and practices constitute an ordinary theology?

The first research question looks at what they believe. The second research question has two parts; it examines firstly the practices which illustrate the people's beliefs and, secondly, looks at the way they express their beliefs in language. The third research question examines the origin of their faith, and explores their religious or theological background and education. The final research question takes a broader look at the data and examines the extent to which what is evidenced in terms of beliefs and practices could be considered to constitute theology.

The people who are the focus group of this research project are those who participate on a regular basis in services, meetings and other events within the rural churches in Mid-Wales; the group has some similarities to the group selected for the study by Harris and Startup (1999) which was located in Wales.

Outline of the thesis

The review of the literature will follow in the next chapter and will take as a starting point the work of Astley (2002), with a critical analysis of his definition of 'ordinary theology', specifically focusing on the third chapter of his book in which he attempts to locate ordinary theology as a field of study in its own right. An attempt will be made to identify where ordinary theology intersects with the variations of theology which exist, particularly in the wider umbrella domain of practical theology.

Following the review of the literature, the third chapter sets out the methodological framework for the study, and attempts a justification of a social science methodology as a suitable approach for exploring theology. In exploring a methodological framework there will be a review of a phenomenological hermeneutical paradigm. This third chapter will include details of the main instrument to be used, the individual semi-structured interview. Ethical considerations will also be covered and the various stages of the research process outlined in detail. Details of the data analysis are presented and the perceived limitations of the study are highlighted.

Chapter 4 presents a description and analysis of the data arising from the empirical study according to the research questions identified; the findings are compared and contrasted with relevant literature. Chapter 5 includes a broader discussion of the extent to which the beliefs and practices amount to an ordinary theology and it presents some tentative conclusions and suggestions for further more in-depth research. It also gives the author the opportunity to reflect on the process and on the study and to suggest what might have been done differently.

Throughout the text the singular pronouns 'they, them, their' will be used as pronouns except where a specific person is referred to, for example the researcher will be referred to as 'he' throughout. References to the Godhead will be masculine throughout.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

In investigating the beliefs and practices of church-goers in rural Wales it is necessary first of all to find a suitable theoretical framework against which to measure it. The model which was selected as a starting point is that of 'ordinary theology' as defined by Astley (2002). This chapter starts, therefore, with a critical analysis of literature relevant to the area of ordinary theology; indeed the initial sections of the chapter will focus on definitions in order to locate the genre within sometimes confusing and overlapping terms. The latter sections of the chapter analyse in greater detail the facets of ordinary theology and highlight the main issues which will be selected as research questions for the empirical study.

Ordinary theology - definitions

Defined by Astley as: *[t]he theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education* (2002: 1) the topic has been under-researched, as quotations in the introductory chapter have suggested. Astley's purpose in writing his work on the topic of ordinary theology is stated in the Preface, namely to present arguments in favour of a more serious study of the topic in order to give theology back to the laity (*op.cit.* viii). The definition is expanded later in this work to include both content and process, that is to say both theology and theologizing, thus the definition is suggested: *the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological*

education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind (ibid. 56). Ordinary theology

is therefore concerned with *the set of processes and practices of holding, developing,*

patterning and critiquing beliefs, thoughts and discourse (ibid.). Ordinary theology

includes 'God-talk' of individuals which refers to: *a form of professing to speak*

about God (Macquarrie, 1967: 11). According to Astley, ordinary theology can refer

to *the content, pattern and processes of ordinary people's articulation of their*

religious understanding, therefore, *the theology of the non-theological adult* (Astley,

2002: 56).

The terms 'lay theology' (Harris and Startup 1999: 145) and 'pew theology'

(Thomson, 2006) refer to broadly the same area, that is to say, the theology held by

the laity. Sadgrove (2008: 102) comments that *the primary theologians of the Church*

are Mrs Murphy and her parish priest at worship (citing Kavanagh (1992: 147). This

implies that, although the lay persons are what Sadgrove calls *implicit theologians*,

they require the discourse offered by the priest to enable the laity to express their love

of God. The priest, while possessing the discourse, is not a theologian simply because

of this. Sadgrove states that they require each other: *they both need the 'sanctuary'*

with its liturgy and its community, in order to be true theologians (ibid: 103). In

omitting one of the key players from the dialogue in this study, the author is perhaps

placing too great a theological burden on the laity who are without an interpreter or

facilitator, although anecdotal evidence would suggest that in rural contexts there is

little distinction between the laity and the clergy in so far as academic theological

study is concerned, although this may be a stereotypical view.

In order to analyse the term ordinary theology further, it is necessary to arrive at definitions of the two main terms, that is ordinary and theology. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1990) defines 'ordinary' as regular, normal, customary or usual. In surveying various versions of the *Concise Oxford*, Astley notes that the word 'ordinary' has come to mean the above plus 'not exceptional, not above the usual, commonplace (COD, 1982), mundane (NSOED, 1996) or 'normal or usual' (COD, 1999) – all references from Astley (2002: 47). In analysing these terms more closely, Astley contrasts the synonyms of ordinary which are either neutral or honourable, such as 'usual' or 'normal' with those which have also pejorative undertones, such as 'common'. The word 'common' is related to the word 'community, 'having things in common'; it is also related to 'undistinguished by rank or position', 'of inferior quality', 'trite' or 'lacking in originality, novelty or distinction'. Astley's contention is that where something is seen to be so ordinary as to be commonplace or unremarkable, it tends to get neglected or rejected in preference to something which is unusual, extraordinary or special. He pursues this argument to suggest why the ordinary is undervalued both in society but more specifically in the context of theology (Astley, 2002: 49).

The term theology also is open to various definitions and interpretations. In some definitions, theology is seen as distinct from faith, although Astley would contend that both are closely related. According to Wainwright (1993), theology is seen as a reflective process (cited in Astley, 2002: 52). *The New Dictionary of Christian Theology* defines theology as an academic discipline, defining it as the rational account given of Christian faith, as furnished by a series of sub-disciplines (Astley, 2002: 53); this implies it is both academic and systematic. Broader definitions also

exist such as *reflection about God* (Macquarrie, 1975: 82) or as *thinking about the questions raised by and about the religions* (Ford, 1999: 10, 15 – cited in Astley, 2002: 53). Farley (1983) has raised the objection to a narrow academic discipline definition of theology by pointing out that until the 18th century theology was not an academic discipline reserved for an intellectual élite, but rather the wisdom to the life of the believer (cited in Astley 2002: 54). Ballard and Pritchard (1996: 13) take Anselm's classic definition of theology *faith searching for understanding*, as a basis for their theological reflection. Green (1990) states that theology is not an end in itself but that it is to be regarded as: *a tool in the transformation and conversion of that creation – that people and society may conform through peace and justice to the Kingdom of God as inaugurated by Jesus Christ* (1990: 12). As a working definition, Green presents the following: *Theology is an active and critical ministry. It investigates and reflects upon God's presence and activity in our lives, and asks what that means for us (ibid.).* He goes on to list various limitations and inadequacies of this definition but for the purpose of this study, which focuses on individual believers, it is a satisfactory starting point. The title of Green's (1990) book: *Let's do Theology* implies a dynamic and an action which should not only inform but also transform: *Our definition needs to stress, then, that Christian theology implies challenge, response and transformation. One cannot do theology without expecting change* (ibid: 13).

Distinguishing ordinary from academic theology, Astley (2002: 60) notes that within the academic discipline, one is less likely actually to 'do' theology than in the domain of the ordinary since the former practice involves more often the study of other people's interpretations of theology than in ordinary theology where the participant is

more actively engaged in theological pursuit. Astley states that academic theology is impersonal, universal, objectifying and that it teaches one to remain at one stage removed from the subject, ensuring that it has no impact on the individual's life whatsoever (paraphrasing Cupitt, 2000 : 47). One might compare 'ordinary theology' to the phrase *theology without books* which Green (1990: 3) uses to denote a theology that is not simply limited to the academic domain.

In one sense Astley sees ordinary theology as a work in progress; he uses the phrase *theological workings* to indicate the process of theological thinking that the average person is engaged in, whereas academic theology can be said to present *completed calculations* (Astley, 2002: 60). It is the developmental not-yet-finished aspect of ordinary theology which makes it such a fascinating subject for empirical study. The attempt to get at the inner theological workings of individual church members' beliefs and practices should provide a fascinating insight into what might be termed their 'inter-theology', taking the phrase from the linguistic term 'inter-language' (Selinker, 1972) which is used to refer to language learners' incomplete grammatical system which they formulate as they progress in their language learning. Astley's phrase *tentative theology* (*ibid.*: 61) suggests that the theology is expressed in a hesitant way, explained possibly by the fact that the laity do not consider themselves to be expert in the area and that they lack the confidence to express their views. Some of those attending church are not hesitant in expressing their opinion on the content and delivery of sermons, although many would not be able to substantiate their opinions with theological knowledge. Astley quotes Ramsey, (1965b: 61 and 1963: 89f) in asserting that: *we can be sure about God; but we must be tentative in theology*, to

indicate that the mystery of God must be approached by both academic and non-academic theologians alike with some reticence. Astley comments further on the difference between confidence in faith and tentativeness in theology, or, in other words the difference between the claims of religious experience on the one hand and theology on the other. He quotes Ramsey's expressions 'significant stuttering' and 'theological stammering' (Astley, 2002: 62) as features which are expressed well within the genre of ordinary theology.

Academic theologians may criticise ordinary theology as being far from theology in the pure sense of the word and that what churchgoers may consider to be theology has neither the rigour nor the doctrinal soundness to be accepted as such. In justifying ordinary theology as a discipline worthy of academic study, one has to consider more applied branches of theology.

In studying beliefs of contemporary churchgoers, it may be that these beliefs and practices do not conform to what might be considered *orthodox* theology and that they may be influenced by factors outside orthodox Christianity. In the following sections, some other domains are presented. Some may be considered different terms to express the same concept, whereas others encompass a broader range of criteria.

Pew theology

Thomson (2006) uses the term 'pew theology', to refer to an area similar to ordinary theology. He states that his term and definition are more colloquial in that they include parish priests and clergy together with those who do not have any formal theological function, since the parish clergy have theological reflections which are rooted in ordinary life; this was highlighted also in the reference to Sadgrove mentioned earlier. Thomson's view is that Christian theology emanates from the pews rather than from books. He sees it as *the theology of ordinary Christians as they practise their faith as church* (2006: 113). He contrasts *phronesis*, practical wisdom (using Gadamer's terms), to refer to that held by the laity with *sophia*, or scholarly wisdom, which was the privilege of the universities and theological establishments. The latter type of theology has developed at the expense of the former, according to Thomson, to the extent that those involved in theology in church contexts seem to regard theology as irrelevant luxury rather than *an intrinsic dimension of their identity* (Thomson, 2006: 111). Thomson refers to the work of Hauerwas (1996) as illustrative of this theology, particularly illustrated in the practices of preaching and friendship as displayed within the church context. Hauerwas sees theology as something which is outlived within the church context, even if the theological significance of their practices is not apparent to the believers. God transforming believers results in theology being present in the pews. It is the role of the theologian, according to Thomson, to facilitate this process by encouraging the believers to be more conscious of their practices and highlighting the theological significance of them. It is the role of the clergy to listen for the theology of the pew rather than trying to influence, colonise or control it (*ibid.*). Following descriptions of two projects which encouraged the believers to become involved more in *phronesis* and thereby be more

in touch with what he terms *primordial theology*, Thomson concludes that *pew theology enables us to see God at work where ordinary people gather and serve in God's name* (*ibid.* 116). The emphasis of Thomson's pew theology appears to be more corporate and more action-oriented, than Astley's which refers more to underlying beliefs of individuals.

Common religion

The work of Towler (1974) is an example of the genre of common religion, which he defines as *those beliefs and practices of an overtly religious nature which are not under the domination of a prevailing religious institution*. Towler compares this with the polarised position of Luckmann (1967: 72) who contrasted official religion with what he termed 'ultimate meaning' by which he meant experiences and beliefs people might hold which are not part of institutional religion. Towler identified common religion as the necessity human beings have to believe something, for example beliefs in the efficacy of prayer, rites of passage, the existence of an ethical code, in general as a means of making sense of personal experience (cited in Clark, 1982: 2). According to Towler and Chamberlain (1973: 24) (cited in Clark, *ibid.*) such common religion *bears little reference to the beliefs and practices of any recognized religious denomination* but it is *highly thematic in form* whilst not occurring as a systematically elaborated set of codes and beliefs. Commenting on this form of belief system, Clark (1982) maintains that many of these aspects of common religion may also conform to the beliefs and practices within the institutional church, but they are often disapproved of and criticized. Whilst Towler's common religion can be regarded as something outside the church, it is Clark's view that many of these beliefs can co-exist alongside

the official beliefs *in a relationship of considerable complexity* (*ibid.*). It is necessary to concede, therefore, that in studying the beliefs and practices of church members, one must be aware that these beliefs may be part of a systematic form of faith which has part of its foundation outside of the religious establishment. Clark (1982: 3) suggests that views held by those outside the church, which are often regarded by the church as superstitious or pagan relics which are irrelevant to established religion *may turn out to be a genuine and full-blown system of popular religiosity*. As an illustration of this, Clark compares the studies of Thomas (1973) of religion in the 16th century and that of Obelkevich (1976) studying religious belief in the 19th century in which religion and society could be seen interacting, in Clark's words: *moulding and shaping one another*. Clark comments further that these studies allow a view of *religion from below*:

> *The religious ideas, feelings, practices and sentiments of the common people, expressed not in terms of their degree of incongruence with institutional religion, but depicted instead as an autonomous religious system juxtaposed with the official one* (1982: 4).

The study of Obelkevich, specifically, is highlighted as giving an insight into this fusion where the subjects of the study, in addition to attending church and chapel, held beliefs which extended beyond Christian beliefs to *encompass an abundance of pagan magic and superstition* (Obelkevich, 1976: 259, cited in Clark, 1982: 4). The point Clark makes is that it is not possible, or even desirable in his view, to equate religious belief with the views of institutional Christianity even during times of *ecclesiastical hegemony* (*ibid.*).

Folk religion

A further term which has to be explored is that of folk religion, again starting with the work of Clark (1982). Clark comments that folk religion *does not refer to a primitive*

form of religion which has been superseded by a more sophisticated one (1982: 5) but it is rather localised and particularistic with the views varying depending on the community in which they exist. Clark compares the definition with those of Mensching (1964) and Hegel. Mensching, for example compares folk religion to that of universal religion, defining it as the religion of a particular community. Hegel's view is that folk religion is *a means of providing some non-divisive cultural form, a cultural form which would unite the powers of the human mind into one society* (cited in Clark, 1982: 170). Clark therefore chooses to use the term 'folk religion' to describe his study since it is located within one rural community. We need, however, to define what is meant by 'religion' and to differentiate what is regarded as religion from what is more tightly defined theology. In the wider sense religion can be described as a system of beliefs, whether they relate to a form of God or not. Religion refers to 'a binding force' and, although used narrowly within Christian contexts to mean faith, it is a term used by others to refer to beliefs in general. For example Berger states: *large masses of people continue to conceive of society in essentially archaic terms down to our own time and regardless of the transformation in the official definitions of reality* (1973: 44; cited in Clark, 1982: 7). Commenting on this assertion, Clark notes the following:

> *This suggests that popular beliefs may tend to lag behind changes in official doctrine or that 'theoretically' crude forms of legitimation may continue to validate personal experience long after religious experts have formulated more 'sophisticated solutions'* (1982: 7).

Clark's study focuses on the belief systems of those within a rural community, attempting to identify the origin of the belief system. Some of these beliefs are influenced by the religious culture and by the church, whereas other aspects remain grounded in the wider context. There is, therefore a juxtaposition of folk religion with

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official religion. Clark cites studies which look at people's belief in fate, chance, charms, luck and superstition. These can be linked to folk beliefs but, it might be argued, should not be seen as part of 'folk religion'. Berger seems to define religion as a *generalised propensity to ascribe meaning to reality* (Clark, 1982: 8). Astley does not see ordinary theology as synonymous with what he terms 'folk religion', 'common religion' or 'implicit religion' which he describes as 'non-institutional religious beliefs and practices or beliefs, attitudes, commitments and practices that are analogous to those of a religion', (citing Clark 1982: 5). Astley (2002: 89) restricts his definition of ordinary theology more to the linguistic expression of religious belief and states that folk religion tends to cover a much broader area, encompassing practices. Whilst Astley sees the importance of ordinary theology being able to find expression in religious practices, the ordinary theology is not itself the religious practices (*ibid.*).

Another term to describe these non-institutional views is that of Martin (1967) who refers to them as 'subterranean theologies'. Towler (u.d., cited in Astley, 2002: 71) elaborates on the subterranean nature of such theologies, stating that they are below *the level of the publicly articulated, religious ideas* and also they are closer to the experiences of ordinary people than *official theological formulation*. Towler argues that by giving the title 'theology' to ordinary beliefs, they are accorded dignity and status which is not the case when they are referred to simply as superstitions.

The previous sections have attempted to distinguish ordinary theology from other terms used by researchers in different contexts. The next section locates ordinary theology within the general area of practical theology

Practical theology

The practical nature of theology was first raised in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa*, according to van der Ven (1993: 33), being practical in that it refers to human activity. In attempting to clarify the place of empirical theology both within its historical and theological context, van der Ven (1993) states that empirical theology is a paradigm of practical theology and practical theology itself is based on the concept of *praxis*. His work provides a very detailed and clear explication of his work within practical theology which adopts an intra-disciplinary approach.

Cartledge (2003: 3) states that practical theology is a *diverse and fragmented discipline* in which even the terms used are disputed. In the introduction to their edited volume on *Pastoral and Practical Theology*, Woodward and Pattison (2000) deal with the distinction and similarities in definitions of the branches of pastoral, practical and applied theology. They maintain that pastoral theology, the oldest term of the three, was originally the term used to refer to the training ordinands received in the skills required for ministry: *It was the theological activity and tradition associated with 'shepherding' or pastoring [the flock]* (2000: 2). According to these authors, practical theology as a term arose within the German Protestant tradition; it referred to the process of applying theological principles to the areas of worship, preaching, Christian education and church government (*ibid.*). They conclude that both pastoral and practical theology are concerned with informing and being informed by practical action in providing a Christian response to the world. As a point of contrast they cite the work of Gerking (1997) and Patton (1990) who make a distinction with the US understanding and use of the terms, where theologians

identify themselves either as pastoral or practical, the latter being the more academic and scholarly. In Britain, by contrast, they maintain that both traditions are less well defined than in the US (Woodward and Pattison, 2000: 3, citing Ballard, 1986). Applied theology is used interchangeably with the term practical theology, although Woodward and Pattison note some objection to the use of the term applied theology in that it implies that: *theology is not affected by an interaction with practical issues* (*ibid.*). They conclude that practical theology implies a dialogical process as opposed to simply applying theological truths in practice. Taking the definition of practical theology contained in the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (*sic.*) (cited by Woodward and Pattison, 2000: 5), only a third of it is directly relevant to this study, namely as: *an area or discipline of theology whose subject matter is Christian practice and which brings to bear theological criteria on contemporary situations and realms of individual and social action* (contained in Hunter, 1990: 934). The other parts of the definition relate to the education clergy receive in carrying out the duties associated with ministry and the life of the church. Other definitions quoted by Woodward and Pattison (2000: 6) are as follows: *The theology of practice* (Campbell, 1987: 212, cited by Woodward and Pattison); *the theological discipline which is primarily concerned with the interaction of belief and behaviour* (Richardson and Bowden, 1983: 455, cited by Woodward and Pattison) and their own earlier working definition: *Pastoral/practical theology is a place where religious belief, tradition and practice meets (sic.) contemporary experiences, questions and actions and conducts a dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually critical and practically transforming* (Pattison with Woodward, 1994: 9 – reprinted in Woodward and Pattison, 2000: 7). When considering ordinary theology in the context of practical theology, it is necessary to recognise that it is a subset of a branch of theology, the

definition of which is wide-ranging, so that only part of the definition applies to ordinary theology.

Lartey (2000) critiques three models of practical theology: the first is the so-called 'branch approach', which views practical theology as a branch of theological science or art. This he traces to the work of Schleiermacher who depicted philosophical theology as the roots, historical as the trunk and practical as the branches of the theological tree. Lartey criticizes this approach as reducing practical theology to second-class status and of neglecting the positive contribution practical theology might have to offer the other areas of theology. The second approach reviewed by Lartey is the 'process approach' in which the emphasis is placed on the method. As examples of this approach he mentions the work of Groome, Farley, Whitehead, Browning, and the pastoral cycles of Green. Lartey fears that the process model over-emphasises method over content and that it can be rather superficial. The third approach to practical theology discussed by Lartey is the *way of being and doing approach*, an approach which *attempts to examine the content of faith and practice* (2000: 131). He cites examples of Black and feminist theologies which fall into this category but comments that this way of being and doing approach can run the risk of being anti-intellectual and overemphasise the context. Lartey proposes a fourth model which is a variation on the 'pastoral cycle' of Green (1990). Lartey's model (2000: 132) contains five phases starting with 'experience' leading to 'situational analysis' and then 'theological analysis' which, in turn, permits 'situational analysis of the theology' in which the faith perspectives are subjected to analysis from the context and the final phase is the 'response'. This model presents a link between the theory of ordinary theology and the actual 'doing of theology'. As such it serves as a model for

believers to reflect on their own beliefs and practices as they develop an awareness of their own theology.

The first sections of this chapter have compared and contrasted ordinary theology with other related definitions and genres. This section has examined the place of ordinary theology within the general area of practical theology. The following sections now change the focus to consider the theology or religious experiences from the perspective of the people. Firstly this section examines the origin of their beliefs and how learning and education contribute to the development of theology.

Theology and learning

Since the focus of this study is the beliefs held by individual churchgoers, the question arises as to the origin of these beliefs. In previous generations, where religious education in schools focused almost exclusively on the Christian Religion and where classes in catechism and attendance at Sunday school were part of individuals' lives, there were clear opportunities for individuals to have access to the input of theology in their everyday lives.

Astley prefers the term *learning religion* to religious education since the latter term can be deemed too narrow and refer to 'deliberate learning' (Astley, 2002: 4). The standard definition of learning is that it is a semi-permanent change in knowledge, skills or attitude which is the result of experience (Gordon and Lawton, 1984: 105 and Gagne, 1972 – cited in Astley: 17). Broadening the definition of learning to include informal learning, incidental learning which is something akin to breathing, Astley maintains that there is very little distinction between learning and acquisition. Astley

maintains that religion is something that is learned, although some aspects may be innate (Astley, 2002: 17); it is learned from others, from tradition and history and through experience and our reflection on experience or through personal discovery. More will be said in a later section which explores in greater detail links between the two processes of acquisition and learning.

Astley is rather negative about so-called child- or learner-centred learning which can be a journey of ignorance and confusion, but he points out that, at its best, it can present the learner as the starting point and it has implications about the content of the education required by the learner. Astley proposes that our religious faith is learned faith and that we are 'faith learners' (*ibid.* 19). In addition to learning which comes about by teaching or an educational programme, Astley refers to education which can come about from the inside, from our reflections, recollections and deliberations in heart and mind.

Learning can also be transformative, however, in that it enables change. The term 'transformative learning' is used to define learning which results in a change of perspective. Such learning continues throughout adult life and is encouraged when learners are confronted with viewpoints which differ markedly from their own. The idea of change within the context of religion can be problematic, however, especially if considering the fundamentals of the faith. Astley (2002: 21) refers to countless changes which have taken place in theology over the centuries. In ordinary theology changes may appear in how believers' own stories connect with the Christian story (Astley, 2002: 24).

At this stage, a brief discussion of the role of Fowler's model of faith will provide some benchmarks of faith development. Influenced by the work of the developmental psychologists Piaget and Kohlberg, Fowler's model provides some interesting insights into a continuum of faith (see, for example, Fowler, 1981 and the volume edited by Astley and Francis, 1992, for details) and suggests a seamless progression from one stage to the next. Fowler identifies seven faith stages through which individual believers can proceed, although it is unlikely that any one believer will process through all stages. Many fossilize at earlier stages.

Stage 0 is termed primal faith and, in terms of age, relates to the stage from birth to two years' of age.

Stage 1 is termed intuitive-projective faith and in age terms is from two to the age of seven. The child at this stage has difficulty distinguishing between symbols and reality. It is filled with fantasy and their faith can be developed by stories of other adults and by their moods and actions.

Stage 2 is called mythic-literal faith from age seven onwards. The beliefs are expressed at this stage in stories and the stories are taken literally. The symbols at this stage are taken as one-dimensional (Fowler, 1981: 149). The child has difficulty in standing outside of the story and reflecting on it.

Stage 3 is synthetic-conventional faith during which the individual is able to form relationships and God is viewed as a divinely personal significant other (*ibid.*: 154). This stage emerges around puberty. The beliefs held may be deeply felt but the individuals are not able to analyse their faith. During this stage the individuals may display faith that is the same as that of their community.

Stage 4 – individuative-reflective faith takes place around mid-twenties, ideally, although it may happen at a later age. During this stage the individual is able to reflect critically on their beliefs and can separate themselves from the belief system of others. The individual can now rely upon themselves and there is a deliberate separation from the previous stages. The individual now moves beyond the story to be able to see it from the viewpoint of another.

Stage 5 is conjunctive faith and not everyone will proceed to this stage which may not emerge until middle-age. At this stage the person is aware that *truth is more multidimensional and organically interdependent than most theories of truth can grasp* (Fowler, 1981: 186). They are aware of the paradoxical and that metaphor can be the main medium through which truth can be seen. At this stage other faith systems may be reflected on as a means of comparison.

Stage 6, the final stage, is that of universalising faith, which very few individuals reach. At this stage the individual does not reflect on the self as the main focus, but is concerned about the needs of others and others' actions. The individual who reaches this stage is more altruistic than those at other stages, to the point of being totally selfless.

One of the major criticisms of this theory of faith development which is of relevance to this study is that of its hierarchical nature and its age-related steps. We cannot say with certain that these stages are sequential and hierarchical and it is not possible to isolate the manifestations of faith to one particular box. Individuals are not like that and they are more erratic and non-linear in their development. This model does not resolve the question of how the believers' theological development progresses.

Astley presents two modes of religious learning (based on the work of Wittgenstein): Firstly 'learning about religion' and, secondly, 'embracing the faith'. These two modes are discussed in turn. Learning about religion is a second-hand activity, according to Astley. He refers to Wittgenstein's (1968) metaphor of theology as grammar (originally attributed to Luther): *theology gives us rules for religious discourse that determine 'what it makes sense to say to God and about God'* (Astley, 2002: 25, citing Holmer, 1978: 141).

It is in using the vocabulary and having exposure to the grammar of faith that our faith develops. More will be said about the relationship between theology, language and communication in the next section. Kerr notes the following:

> *it is very much a question of learning to trace what may rightly be said, and what has to be excluded as inappropriate or obsolete…Theology as grammar is, then, the patient and painstaking description of how, when we have to, we speak of God.* (1986: 146f., citied in Astley, 2002: 25)

According to Astley (*ibid.* 26) *this mode is a form of socially contextualized religious learning* and it cannot simply be the activity of individuals. It is within the faith community that one learns to use the grammar of theology appropriately, or not, as the case may be. This argument assumes a social environment rich in theological input which is not, it is my observation, the reality of contemporary society, either within or outside the church context. It assumes that learning and teaching are happening both in schools and in churches which cannot be taken for granted. Within this mode, which is objective or third-person oriented, a distinction needs to be drawn between learning about and accepting what is taught. Learning about theology is, according to Rhees (1969) learning how to use the word God appropriately:

This may seem to be making theology superficial. Just learning the sorts of things it is correct to say – is that theology? Well I do not see how theology can be anything else (cited in Astley, 2002: 25).

This abstract, third-person teaching contrasts with the second mode, namely 'embracing the faith' which might be described as the first-person mode, whereby the religious learner accepts what is being taught, responds to it and accepts it as part of themselves. The example given by Martin (1994: 190 cited in Astley, 2002: 27) is that such a person no longer knows simply the word God but responds to it. Such a believer will react to the Gospel, and will 'seize' the message of the Gospel, 'believingly', using Wittgenstein's terms (cf. Astley, 2002: 28). This first-person response is what makes faith, faith. It is different from abstract or third-person learning as it becomes part of one's belief system. The question is the extent to which the third-person mode is required before one attains the second first-person stage. Astley suggests that it will vary and that, for some people it could be contemporaneous, for others it may be a much longer process. Kierkegaard, whilst admitting that mode 1 of learning does exist, that is to say third-person learning *about* religion, he regards it as something of an oxymoron and he considers the personal response to be crucial to Christianity. It is not something one learns about but something one responds to in a personal way. Kierkegaard refers to religious truth as *an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness* (Kiergekaard, 1941: 182, cited in Astley, 2002: 35). Thus, whilst there is undoubtedly a community aspect to religious learning, there is also a very strong individual argument and that the learning of religion is a 'personal thing' (Astley, 2002: 34). Astley talks about our embracing of the faith as being part of us: *it is the sort of truth that we do not just know, but are 'in'* (*ibid.* 36). The question which is difficult to answer is the extent to which those who attend church regularly, such as

the people involved in this study, move from mode 1 to mode 2 and how the process has evolved for them. Too much emphasis on subjectivity can lead to confusion; if there is too much objectivity there is no personal ownership of the reality of faith. Furthermore, if there is no formal teaching in the basics of the faith, how do learners grow? If it is all subjective, then, like an unattended garden, they can end up developing all sorts of ideas which are real and based on their own experience but are not 'sound doctrine'. At Alpha courses in which people are encouraged to express their opinions without fear of ridicule or condemnation, one hears all sorts of heresies from churchgoers who have been attending churches all their lives but have received no clear teaching on theology.

Astley criticises the church in general for containing *too much junk* (2002: 37) and he fears that, unlike Drury's (1972) metaphor of the church as a junk shop where it may be possible to find *something* good amongst the junk items, there is not much good to be found at all. Astley refers to the term of Wood (1996) 'second-hand theology' to refer to simply learning about theology without embracing it for oneself. Astley admits that such second-hand theology is first necessary prior to one's embracing it, moving forward in it and becoming a critical enquirer, engaging in some critical reflection. Astley seems to achieve the right balance here because one needs to learn something somehow before moving on and having ownership of it; otherwise people engage in a cyclical process of contemplation, not quite sure as to what they are looking at, with a collection of unconnected experiences and viewpoints which have been gleaned from a variety of sources. Of course there are aspects of theology and religion which are not tangible: *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see* (Hebrews 11: 1) and it is accepted that one can be the

most learned scholar of theology without the slightest evidence of faith or of any first-hand learning or embracing of the truth. Faith is something very personal and, according to Fowler, is not the content but rather the process of how we give ourselves to what we consider to be ultimate (Astley, 2002: 39). We all believe and have faith in something (Fowler, 1981) and we all have our idols and 'gods'. The question remains as to where these beliefs come from and how, within the church, one can be sure that what is believed conforms to Christian orthodoxy.

If we are relying on the churches to provide the teaching of theology in which learners who are tuned-in can acquire more knowledge, some doubts may be raised at the value of sermons which in many Anglican churches are not much longer than ten-minute homilies and which present not more than a sound-bite of content. One of the research questions for this study is the origin of people's beliefs and the means by which they feed their faith: RQ 3 *From where do churchgoers gain their theology and how do they develop in their understanding of what they believe?* Farley (1996a: 31) formulates many of the questions which are implied in this research question:

- *Why is it that education in the congregation and for the believer at large is so conceived that it has little to do with the disciplines and rigours of ordered learning?*
- *Why is it that theological education, on-going studies in disciplines and skills necessary for the understanding and interpretation of Scripture, doctrines, moral principles and policies and areas of praxis, defines something needed by Christian clergy but never by Christian laity?*
- *How is it that the Church continues to settle for the pre-modern pattern of educated clergy and uneducated laity and form the almost uncrossable gulf between theological 'clergy' education and church education?*

These questions lie at the heart of this study. Farley argues that church education should be theological and that it should be ordered. He traces the word 'theology' back to the time when it referred to the *wisdom proper to the life of the believer*

(Farley, 1996a: 33) as opposed to the more narrow discipline which has been noted as more academic. In this sense, therefore, what Farley is arguing for is for ordinary theology to be recognised and faith to be seen as *the believer's ways of existing in the world before God* (*ibid.*). In relating ordered learning both to reality, by which he refers to truth, and also to faith or wisdom, Farley warns against two extremes, the one equates faith with knowledge, whilst the other extreme regards knowledge as having no place within faith. Faith has to be thinking but not simply the possession of knowledge. Farley states: *existence in the world before God requires a wisdom (theology) which is not merely spontaneous but is a self-conscious interpretive response* (1996a: 35). He is thereby arguing that faith involves wisdom and that wisdom involves ordered learning. Farley continues to contrast the post-Enlightenment emphasis on cognition and understanding which permeates all fields of learning with the ignorance in which ordinary Christian believers remain, despite advances in pedagogy, resources, curricula and training. Farley concludes that the reason for the gulf which exists between the education of the clergy and the lack of ordered learning for the laity lies *in the deep structures of the church's self-understanding* (ibid: 35) and involves assumptions made about faith, theology, learning and education. Farley traces the changing meaning of theology from its description of the life of the believer to its narrowing position within the university sector and, from then, as a discipline, or disciplines for the clergy and academics. It was in recognition of the place of ordered theology as the prerogative of the clergy which resulted in the view that it is therefore not appropriate for the ordinary believer in the church context. What is thought to be appropriate for the ordinary believer is what Farley calls the 'homiletic paradigm' which sees nurture in faith taking place as part of the weekly liturgical event, the service on Sunday and the preaching of the

Word: *the corporate event of this preaching is the decisive and sufficient way the faith of the believer is formed* (ibid: 40). This is of concern, for if a short sermon or is the only form of nourishment, it is little wonder that the churchgoers appear to be languishing from malnutrition. Farley argues that there are deficiencies in this model since the application to life of the text simplifies and replaces the tasks of interpreting and reflecting on situations in which believers find themselves. The ordered learning required for the nurture of faith, as argued by Farley, is restricted to the clergy who are the ones responsible for the mining of the text and deciding on the points they wish to make which they feel are appropriate for the life of the believer. We might agree with Farley that the points highlighted for transmission and for application tend to be moral or therapeutic, therefore the diet they are fed can be repetitive and predictable. This disempowers the believers who adopt a position of passivity within the church and see no need for any ordered learning. All the congregation receives is one or two illustrated points; those who pay attention may recall the illustrations but have little idea of the theology behind the point and even less idea of its significance and place in the wider structure of theological education. The inadequacy of this model of Christian formation has been recognised, however and various models of Christian education have been proposed. One of the negative consequences of this, according to Farley, however, is that since education is taken to mean something much more general and to refer to *a community's total formative process and its sociology of knowledge* (Farley, 1996a: 42), the sense of ordered learning is lost. Therefore despite 20th century attempts to provide Christian education in the wider sense, this has not been systematic or ordered, that is to say *subject matters with their methods and modes of thought, cumulative, sequential stages of learning, rigorous disciplines* (Farley, 1996a: 42). Churches focus on administration of education

programmes with no systematic focus and no progression. Farley's view would be supported by the present author's experience of various churches and church denominations. Where directors of education or elders have been in post in church contexts, their role has been restricted to providing programmes of interest but with no inherent progression. Farley argues that if the church is to abandon the idea that education within the church should not be theological education, there will need to be a radical shift in the type of provision offered and it will have to involve the introduction of *rigorous educational process and post-Enlightenment tools of analysis* such as *historical, literary, social, psychological and philosophical* (Farley, 1996a: 43).

Seymour (1996) argues that theology is not the most appropriate macrotheory for religious instruction; he states that religious and theological instruction have distinct natures. Theological content of religious instruction must be reshaped into social scientific form if it is to be teachable.

Hauerwas, on the other hand, maintains that the church is completely about theological education: *I would contend that everything the church is and does is 'religious education'* (1996: 97) just as the church does not possess a social ethic but *is*, rather, a social ethic. Hauerwas states that the primary task of the church is to teach the people the Christian story: *The story is the point, the story is the experience and the story is the moral* (*ibid.* 103). He is of the opinion that religious education is not something that is done to make us Christians or something that is done after we have become Christians, but it is the training in the skills necessary to live faithfully to the message of Jesus. Hauerwas sees the aim of Christian education to equip us to

live life better and more faithfully to the story rather than to progress intellectually in our faith. Although not willing to argue against intellectual progression, Hauerwas takes the view that we do not become better Christians if we gain more knowledge. He compares the experience of the mentally handicapped (*sic.*) who, in his view, would be disadvantaged if progress in the faith equated with intellectual progression. He argues that he is not suggesting that the retarded (*sic.*) represent a minimum requirement for religious education but that this group of individuals are an example of those who *hear, tell and embody the story* (Hauerwas, 1996: 104). Since theologians, according to Hauerwas, do little to make the world a better place, he implies that theology should remain the domain of study of the few. Surely some formal education within the church context, systematic and ordered learning as mentioned by Farley (1996a) and development in faith and faithfulness are not mutually exclusive?

Osmer (1990) states that Christians are all involved in a kind of theological reflection as they interpret their lives in relation to God. In order to be critically reflective, however, or theologically reflective, more precisely, one has to have some knowledge on which to base one's theological reflection. Society would not want a surgeon to be let loose with the tools of the trade without ensuring that they had the necessary knowledge and on-going continuing professional development to keep up-to-date with new discoveries and techniques. Yet what some theologians seem to imply that Christians within the church, simply by going week after week, thereby imbibe all that is required to let them live their lives faithfully and in faith. How can they reflect theologically if they have no concept of what theology is and if their knowledge of God is limited to their own local environment and their personal experience? Of

course this raises the question as to what actually constitutes theology at this level. Ritschl (1984) sees theology as having a critical function for believers (cited in Astley, 2002: 141). He distinguishes between the broad and narrow sense of theology. In the broad sense it represents discourse about maters of faith and in the narrow sense theology is *reflection that tests the implicit axioms that regulate the thought, speech and action of believers, in a critical examination of their statements (ibid.).*

From the perspective of parish priest and theological educator Elias (2006) discusses four models of providing theological education for the laity; although he is writing from a Roman Catholic perspective much of his experiences could be recognised within the Anglican tradition. He cites Farley's distinction between theological education, which was designed for those training for the ministry, and religious education which is the weaker form aimed at the laity. He lists various reasons why participation in theological education has been poor, citing the work of McKenzie (1978) who found a:

> *perceived non-relevance, involvement in other activities, physical incapacity, alienation from church activities, negative attitude towards education, resistance to change, estrangement or feeling of not belonging and a non-joining life style* (cited in Elias, 2006: 180).

One of the consequences of not engaging in a systematic process of educating the laity is, according to Elias (2006) that adults will remain in a *state of religious childhood marked by religious bafflement* (citing Hull, 1985: 9). The four models discussed by Elias are the following: preaching, disciplined learning, small group faith sharing and conscientization.

He contrasts the sermons given generally by Protestant ministers where the focus is on the Word with the short, ten-minute homilies designed to inspire and edify. Elias quotes the definition of preaching given by Tisdale (1997: 38) as:

> *a highly contextual act of constructing and proclaiming theology within and behalf of a local community of faith. It requires of the preacher interpretation of biblical texts, interpretation of contemporary contexts and the imaginative construction and communication of local theology that weds the two in a fitting and transformative way* (cited in Elias, 2006: 181).

Elias, with experience of both preaching and teaching, agrees with the limitations of preaching as education outlined by Farley but he sees the approach adopted in the work by Tisdale (1997), cited above, as providing a way of increasing the theological education within the preaching paradigm. There appears to be agreement however, that the sermon as a medium of providing systematic theological education, or even religious education, is inadequate.

The second model discussed by Elias is that of theological education as disciplined learning and he presents the work of Farley as the best case for this model. Education in this model would consist of *ad hoc* classes designed for laity and, according to Farley are designed: *to recover and continue to hold before the community the contents of its tradition, bring discipline to ways of interpreting those contents and make available tools from a variety of human sciences in this undertaking* (Farley, 2003: 129, cited in Elias, 2006: 185). Such courses within the Anglican church are limited, although the focus on training for categories of volunteer or even paid non-clergy within the church are becoming more systematic, for example the training of lay readers, youth-workers and worship leaders. There are, however, examples of formal education courses within the church which are accredited by universities and

offered on full and part-time basis to church members. Elias, whilst agreeing with Farley, that disciplined, systematic teaching is required, regards other types of theological education as important such as experiential learning, praxis-focused and spirituality-focused approaches.

The third model of theological education outlined by Elias is that of the small faith sharing groups which are less demanding and less threatening than a formal education context. The Alpha course would be an example of one such course although it would provide a more systematic approach to learning the basics of the faith than other small groups. These groups have the advantage of being an entry point for some wishing to explore the faith before joining a church. The house-groups formed within larger congregations are designed as Bible study but also support ministries for church members. The advantage of such groups is the fact that the format they take can vary according to local or changing circumstances and that they can give a sense of community and belonging to the group members. The disadvantage, in Farley's terms, would be that the education they provide is not necessarily systematic but depends on the material used.

The fourth model discussed by Elias is that of conscientization which is aimed more at church leadership.

Elias concludes that education within theological contexts is not safe and that it can be: *a revolutionary force for individuals, institutions and societies* (Elias, 2006: 191). Perhaps it is because of this explosive potential that many clergy steer away from liberating the congregation. Considering such potential for the church, it is perhaps as

a result of a lack of emphasis on theological education or even religious education in schools over decades, sometimes under the guise of political correctness or inclusion that we have ended up with generations of children who have no concept of the basics of a Christian education and, as a result we have a society with no Christian basis.

In this section various models of Christian education, theological and religious instruction have been reviewed. It has given some insight into the third research question, namely: from where do believers gain their theology and how do they develop in their understanding of what they believe? The following section examines the relationship between theology and one of the main ways through which theology is expressed, namely language; it also provides some evidence in response to the second research question which asks how believers expression for their beliefs.

Language and theology

Language and theology are inextricably linked: *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God* (John 1: 1); *And God said: Let there be light and there was light* (Gen 1: 3). The Deity identifies Himself in the Old Testament with the verb: *I AM who I AM* (Gen. 3: 14) and communicates with creation and with humankind through language. There is, therefore, a mysterious relationship between the Godhead, theology and language.

In research on language, a distinction is drawn between the two process of 'acquisition' and 'learning'. The most strident view of the distinctiveness of each of the processes was held by the applied linguist, Stephen Krashen, whose input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) was one of the most influential forces in shaping the way

languages were taught in schools internationally. Languages are 'learned' in the formal setting of the classroom, where learners are exposed to the rules of generally artificially constructed language, whereas language 'acquisition' of the mother tongue takes place in the naturalistic setting. Krashen points to the obvious advantage children learning their mother tongue have over those who learn languages in artificial settings; he maintains that both processes are absolutely separate and so he recommends that, in order for language teaching to be effective, the setting should mirror the naturalistic setting as much as possible. Krashen's views were widely criticised at the time and in many ways have been discredited. Nevertheless, the fact remains that there is a discernible difference, however it may be explained, in the way babies acquire and teenagers learn languages. The presence of the so-called *Language Acquisition Device*, or LAD (Chomsky, 1957) enables children to make sense of the unfiltered language to which they are exposed and to make sense of the grammatical system for which they have been 'hard-wired'.

The comparison between language acquisition and acquisition of theology appears in the debate on the natural foundations of religion (Barrett, 2000; Barrett and Lanman, 2008). A relatively new discipline, this area of research is a cognitive science of religion which suggests that religion, defined by Barrett (2000: 29) *as a shared system of believes and actions concerning superhuman agency*, is acquired in the same was as other cognitive processes. Comparing religion to language, Barrett states:

> *Much as language is naturally acquired as a result of cognitive preparedness plus exposure to a typical sociolinguistic environment, ordinary cognition plus exposure to an ordinary environment goes a long way towards explaining religion* (ibid).

What Barrett refers to as an 'ordinary environment' in the context of this study could be narrowed to refer to the specific environment in which the participants find themselves, a society which was steeped in formal religion. Barrett hints at the domain of ordinary theology in differentiating true science from 'folk science' and stating that religious concepts are differentiated from theological concepts in their relative conceptual simplicity.

Astley's distinction between academic theology and ordinary theology in some ways echoes the distinction between the acquisition and learning processes in language. The following words of Jesus seem to suggest that children are more readily disposed to accept the Kingdom of God and that one needs to emulate children's responsiveness to the Gospel in order to be accepted:

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" Mt 11:25.

And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 18:3).

It is possible to suggest that children are 'hard-wired' for God and that their attitudes facilitate the acceptance of the kingdom of God unquestioningly. Is ordinary theology the remnant of that child-like ability to discern the things of God, the acquisition of theology, as it were, whereas the academic discipline of theology is that which is learned? It may be that children are fitted with a *Theology Acquisition Device* (TAD) or *God Acquisition Device* (GAD) which, if not nourished, fails to develop. If we take the analogy further, it could be argued that the lack of any theological awareness is as a result of the impoverished nature of the naturalistic theological environment, be it in the church or in society, particularly in the early years of a person's life. The

setting for theological 'learning', presumably the theological college or university is one which is the domain of the learned few.

So language is vital to the communication between the Deity and humankind and similarities between one's acquisition of the mother tongue as first language and an awareness of God has been highlighted. Language is also the vehicle with which beliefs are articulated and expressed and in the context of this study it is the main means by which the beliefs of the churchgoers can be interpreted.

God-talk

The term God-talk has been referred to at the beginning of the chapter to explain what is meant by ordinary theology. This requires further exploration.

Astley (2004) uses the term 'religious language' to refer both to the language used in prayer, worship and ordinary religious language and expression and also to the language used by academic theologians. Sometimes, a distinction is made in the literature between religious language and theological language which is used by the latter group. When the term 'religious language' is used for both categories, a distinction is sometimes made between primary and secondary religious language, the former referring to metaphorical and the latter to conceptual use of language. Theological language is a specialist form which is beyond the scope of this study.

According to Astley (2004: 5), ordinary theology *relies on aphorism, personal biography and anecdote*, and is *rich in figurative language*. One of the main forms of figurative language used within the context of religious language is that of metaphor,

the using of language from one domain to refer to that of another. When metaphors are well used, there is no need for the speaker to point out the significance of the points of contact to the hearer (Soskice, 1985: 23, cited in Astley, 2004: 38). Good use of metaphor involves both cognitive and affective domains, giving the hearer new insights into the subject matter. In addition to metaphor, models are used in conveying religious sentiments and ideas. Models are where words are used to refer *to one thing or state of affairs in terms of another* (Soskice, 1985: 50f.); as such the words actually refer to the subject under discussion and can be thought of as more stable or long-lasting metaphors (Astley, 2004: 41). Examples of models would be references to person to refer to God or architect in the context of creation (*ibid.*). According to Ramsey (1957), heresy results from adhering to one model and taking it too far; orthodoxy on the other hand, can emerge from mixing models. This is reinforced by McFague (1983: 139ff., cited in Astley, 2004: 44) who talks about theology existing from a network of models, since one model cannot do justice to the richness of the divine-human relationship. A third type of language used in religious language is 'myth', which, according to Avis (1999: 125) *constellate[s] sacred symbolism in narrative sequence.* Used in this way the term myth is similar to the word 'story', both of which can also be taken to refer to something which is made-up and not true. In the sense it is used here, however, the word myth also involves a personal dimension (Astley, 2004: 49). Analogy is another linguistic device we employ in speaking about religious things. Aquinas distinguished between analogies of proportionality, where there is a relationship between two things and analogy of attribution, where, for example, an adjective can be applied to a noun, although it does not actually describe the noun itself but is the cause of the attribute. Astley (ibid: 60) uses the example of 'healthy diet' to illustrate the point. The problem in extending

this to talk about God is that that, since He is creator of all, we could apply all attributes to Him. According to Avis (1999: 5) imagination is crucial to the understanding of Christianity; in terms of language, God communicates with us through our imagination and theology *does its work in the realm of analogy.*

At times the term 'God-talk' is used to refer to the language that is used in talking *about* God (e.g. Wren, 1989), whereas at other times it refers to the language used by the believer to talk *with* or *to* God. Wren (1989) maintains that God-talk is not different linguistically from non-God-talk; Wren thinks there is no specific discourse genre for this language. In a sense the language is both the medium and the content of expressing theology.

The seminal work on God-talk which has influenced all subsequent contributions to the topic is that of Macquarrie (1967) on which this section is largely based. The translation of the word theology into Anglo-Saxon, is, according to Macquarrie, God-talk, that is to say, talk about God, at a sophisticated level. He makes a distinction, however, between talking about God and talking about other things, so that God-talk is rather special and different from other forms of discourse; in short, the problem is how to use human language to talk about divine subject-matter (1967: 33). Macquarrie discusses the distinction between theological language and religious language, the latter being the language used in various forms of communication such as praying, praising, blessing etc. and he extends religious communication to non-verbal expressions such as music, poetry and even silence. Theological language is related to religious language, however, according to Macquarrie in that it:

arises out of religious language as a whole, and it does so when a religious faith becomes reflective and tries to give an account of itself in verbal statements. What is done (ritual) perhaps came before what is said (myth), but the myth and ritual go together in a reciprocal interpretation of each other, and one can say that the myth is already implicit in the ritual (1967: 19).

As such, theological language or God-talk can be an expression of what people 'do' in religious terms and it must in some way gain its sense from practice. If theological language becomes separated from the manifestations of faith, or, in the words of Macquarrie, if it becomes *detached from its living background*, then it can appear senseless (*ibid.*). The problem, according to Macquarrie, is that the religious context from which the theological language should derive its meaning, is apparently absent. If this were the case in 1967 when Macquarrie was writing, we can only assume that the situation is much less meaningful today in the 21st century which is more secularised and divorced from the Christian religion. Macquarrie refers to the advent of the great religions, when language was used to explain, or to invoke the divine; he gives examples of Moses on Mount Sinai (e.g. Exodus 24: 9ff.) or Elijah confronting the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18: 39). Today, however, believers in some Christian denominations would point to other contemporary manifestations such as healings, speaking in tongues and driving out of demons as evidence of the divine reality of faith underlying the language. In other denominations, such as the Anglican tradition, the reality of the Divine would be perceived in the ritual of the Eucharist. Whether believers would be able to articulate the theology in language which would constitute 'God-talk' is another question.

Macquarrie's argument is based on the use of theological language to express religious truths at a high level of sophistication. There are, however, aspects of what he is saying that are pertinent to this study. If theologians have difficulty finding

language to express the great truths underlying faith and religion, how much more difficult must it be for the average person in churches to find the language appropriate to express their inner faith, albeit expressed outwardly in ritual and activity? The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the average believer may never have been taught the basics of the theology let alone the required vocabulary to give expression to their faith and belief or the grammar with which to put it all together in a coherent whole. Another argument, of course, is that any sort of experience of religion is inexpressible and, in the words of Wittgenstein: *Whereof one cannot speak, thereon one must be silent* (cited by Macquarrie, 1967: 24). Many contemporary believers may agree with such a statement and maintain that they have a 'private' faith which they want to keep to themselves. Whether such an assertion might simply be an inability to express oneself in meaningful language, remains to be seen. Macquarrie goes on to reject the idea that if it is inexpressible, religious faith should not be put into words. He argues that: *the man (sic.) of religious faith, if he believes that some kind of knowledge has been revealed to him, must look for some way of expressing it in words* (*ibid.* 25).

In attempting to find a solution to the problem of God-talk Macquarrie reviews the work of three of the main theologians of the 20th century – Bultmann, Barth and Tillich. For Bultmann, there is a distinction between the language of mythology and the language of analogy; the former is used to speak of God when He manifests Himself in natural events, whereas the latter is where we talk of God acting in the form of a personal encounter. Of particular interest to this study, moreover, is the work of Karl Barth, whose theology has been called the 'theology of the Word', thereby indicating both the link to Jesus as the Son of God and God's 'Word' to

communicate to the human race. Barth sees the linguistic as of fundamental importance to the Christian faith. He sees the direction of communication as unidirectional, namely from God to humans, not human beings using their understanding of the known world talk of God, or put thus: *how the words of man (sic.) can bring to expression the primary Word of God* (cited in Macquarrie, 1967: 43), the word being revealed in Jesus, in the Scriptures and the proclaimed word of the Church. According to Macquarrie, however, the work of Barth, whilst highlighting the use of language in divine communication, does not help us in finding expression for this divine language in human language. It is recognised that those who are Christians, that is to say, those *who have been made receptive to the truth of God by the Holy Spirit (ibid.* 47), still need to use the vocabulary and syntax of ordinary human language to express their faith. Returning to the direction from divine to human which informs Barth's theology, he concludes that the expression of our faith does not depend on the human language but rather on what God does with that language in enabling us to use it to speak about God: *According to Barth, God makes our language about him veridical* (ibid: 49; emphasis in original). Just as God condescended to us in the form of Jesus, the divine *Logos*, so he condescends to enable human language to express his divine language; this analogy is referred to as the *analogia gratiae (ibid.*: 48).

This may raise another problem for this study in that it cannot be assumed that all who attend church are those receptive to the Holy Spirit, as mentioned above, but they may simply be within the church, going through the rituals but without any meaningful interaction taking place within. If this be the case their human language will be all they have got at their disposal to express their faith, as it exists to them. In other

contexts, another phenomenon can arise, where people use a form of language they have imbibed from experience within their own religious group; they may have been subjected to and, as a result, use phrases such as 'God said to me...' to give authority to their own thoughts, feelings and preconceptions. On the other hand, they may be right in having perceived the Word of the Lord.

In conducting interviews and in interpreting people's responses in the interview on beliefs and practices, it is necessary for the researcher to look beyond the surface to what the participants actually mean. Wittgenstein (1968: para. 664) makes a distinction between deep and surface grammar and it is for understanding of the former which the interviewer must strive. This is made more difficult if both parties do not understand the rules of the language game or if they are, at worst, operating different sets of rules or playing a different type of game (see Wittgenstein, 1968: paras. 66 – 83 for analogy of game applied to language). The concept of the language game to refer to the language of religion is not accepted by some. Bell (1969), for example, states that Wittgenstein's language games do not refer to complete types of discourse but are rather units of linguistic behaviour, or functions, include giving orders, reporting an event, play-acting, making a joke, asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying (Wittgenstein, 1968: par. 23). Bell comments that religious language will employ various language games such as telling stories or reporting. Sherry (1977) agrees partly with Bell's conclusion but points out that Wittgenstein's use of the term 'language game' is much more variegated and that it is used inconsistently, so that one might be able to use the term language game to refer *to the ordinary believer's talk about God's nature and actions* (Sherry, 1977: 24). This discourse would still, however, make use of the language of various language games.

Van der Ven (1993) states that for communication to take place, three aspects need to be present, namely intentionality, reciprocity and effectiveness. Intentionality refers to the intention of the interlocutor to pass on information; information is a precondition for communication; non-verbal communication, according to van der Ven is a necessary but not sufficient condition in this respect. Reciprocity implies that communication must be two-way, circular so that the recipient of the information has to respond in some way, even if it involves rejecting the information. Intentionality is thereby a prerequisite for reciprocity. Another feature of the communicative process is that the roles alternate. The sender becomes the recipient of the information which is sent by the one who received and processed the initial information; thus it is a dynamic process: *an integrated whole of constantly shifting sender-recipient interactions* (van der Ven, 1993: 52). The final aspect of communication, namely effectiveness is more difficult in that it is not clear whether only communication which is effective can be regarded as successful communication. It implies that communication does not take place when people talk to each other, without understanding each other. Van der Ven concludes that the minimum criterion for successful effective communication is when an exchange of interpretations takes place. In the context of this study, communication is vital but is, as has been mentioned above, problematic, not least because of the lack of consistency of use of vocabulary but also because of the different experiences of the participants in the study. Van der Ven (1993: 53ff.) highlights a number of types of misunderstandings which can take place between those involved in communication. Although referring primarily to interpretations of old and new texts, what he says has some relevance for this study. He notes four areas of limitations within communication: (a) the limits of both sender and recipient; (b) the limits of the language used by both; (c) the limits

inherent in the relationship between sender and recipient and (d) the limits of the context. As the main ones to concern this study relate to language and culture, only the first two limitations are discussed here. In order to ease reading, the exact words used by van der Ven, since many of these refer to quite technical concepts, have been incorporated into the next two paragraphs without italics. The reader is referred to van der Ven (1993: 53-55):

(a) Firstly, human beings are fallible and are subject to the limitations of memory, concentration and perception. Furthermore, they can actively intend to deceive and mislead. There is the added danger of transference where some piece of information conveyed by the sender is interpreted by the recipient on the basis of their own perception and experience which colours the intended message. (van der Ven gives the example of a preacher talking about the fatherhood of God being misheard by a member of the congregation who has had a bad experience with her own father);

(b) Secondly there are limitations imposed by the language used. Van der Ven discusses in detail the possible communication problems involved in using different speech acts. Austin (1962) discusses three aspects of the speech act: locution (the utterance itself), illocution (the act performed by the words) and perlocution (what the words cause to be done as a result).

(c) The main types discussed are: constative (concerned with the truth of the objective world); regulative (concerned with the rightness of norms and values in the social world) and expressive (concerned with the authenticity of personal feelings and mental structures in the subjective world); meta-communicative (concerned with the rules of communication) and operative (concerned with the rules of logic and grammar). In addition to speech acts,

further difficulties can arise from linguistic symbols which, again are sub-divided into three aspects: semantic aspect (concerned with the relation of the symbol to reality); syntactic aspect (concerned with the content or mental concept of the symbol within a larger symbolic context) and the pragmatic aspect (concerned with the relationship between the language and the action). Misunderstandings can take place if a simple statement is taken by the recipient as a speech act or linguistic symbol which was not intended. The problem can originate both with the recipient and the sender. When one considers the possibilities of manipulation and misunderstanding which can happen within the context of a sermon, it is not surprising that there is sometimes a lack of clarity and lack of communication about the message. Each person listening to a religious or theological message has their own concept of linguistic symbols and comes to the spoken text with their own preconceptions and reactions. This area is thus a minefield of possible mis-communication. Similarly in conducting the empirical part of the study, the researcher will need to be aware of possible areas of misunderstanding and interpreting vocabulary and syntax the way the participants intend.

In discussing speech acts, Astley (2004) adds to the list mentioned above commissives and prescriptives. Commissives commit the speaker to an action or to accept an obligation, to characterise agreements, commitments, promises and covenants or to have a non-cognitive meaning or function. Prescriptives lay an obligation on the hearer and can characterise commands, requests questions and supplication. They also can have a non-cognitive function.

Language and language use link the believer or the individual to faith. According to Bevans (2002), theology is linked to context. In terms of language, our use of language is also linked to our background and context. Williams uses the analogy of accent to refer to the way we acquire our Christian beliefs: *no-one learns Christianity without a local accent* (2001: 9). Expanding on this image, Astley (2004: 115) explains that the term 'local accent' refers to: *the content, form and style of religious discourse that reflects their age, gender, class, upbringing, form of education, spirituality, and so on.* Since talking about God and things of faith is therefore likely to be a very personal and indeed sensitive thing, Astley urges us to be sensitive in dealing with and correcting one another's ways of speaking about God. There are of course individual differences in how people use language and religious language is no different. Astley notes the main gender differences in using language, for example. Whereas women tend to talk about and to God in similar ways, men tend to make a greater distinction between the two modes (Astley, 2002: 79). Referring to works by Le Guin (1989), Slee (2004), Tannen (1992), TeSelle (1975)/ McFague (1983), Astley makes the statement that men's talk about God appears more objective and more closely related to the academic style of speech, whereas women's religious language about God tends to be more metaphorical, narrative and personal. Le Guin makes a distinction between what she calls 'mother tongue', that is the mother tongue of relationships and of the home and she contrasts this to the 'father tongue' which is more 'disinterested' and objective. Astley suggests that ordinary theology is connected with the 'mother tongue' Le Guin also mentions a third language – 'my native tongue' which is a blend of both mother and father tongue – which creates the baby talk of art (cited in Astley, 2002: 79). As such women's God-talk is more metaphorical theology or mother-tongue theology (Astley, 2004: 124). Again a more

detailed analysis of gender and sociolinguistic differences in use of language is beyond the scope of this current thesis. The reader is referred to the above works for a more in-depth analysis, particularly at women's theology and use of language in expressing it. However these distinctions are worth bearing in mind when considering the transcripts of the participants presented in chapter 4. This section has contributed to the second research question, namely how churchgoers express their beliefs.

Contextualising the study

The chapter concludes by presenting some research evidence which paints a picture of the rural Church in Wales. Bevans (2002) argues that there is no such thing as theology in a vacuum but only contextualised theology. He opposes the notion of traditional classical theology which was an objective science of faith, based on Scripture and tradition. Contextual theology, on the other hand, recognises the importance of present human experience and considers culture, history, contemporary thought forms in addition to Scripture and tradition. Bevans maintains therefore that context is not an extra but rather a *theological imperative* (2002: 3), so that theology *per se* does not exist, but rather feminist theology, Black theology, African theology etc. As such, the study of theology is more subjective than objective, in the sense that the individual context is the source of the reality, although the danger of such a contextual model, from an evangelical position, might be that it can relativise truths in attempting to speak to the contemporary context.

Bearing this caveat in mind, therefore, it could be argued that this study is focused on what is termed 'rural theology', since the context is a rural community in West/Mid-

Wales. It is impossible, according to Bevans, to exclude the context from the study of theology which includes four elements: firstly the experiences of a person's personal life; secondly culture, defined as: [that] *system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life* (Bevans, 2002: 6, citing Geertz (1973). Thirdly context includes social location, that is to say the social context in which one is located, e.g. gender, nationality, socio-economic status. Fourthly contextual theology must take account of social change. Although in some respects the notion of contextual theology is new, Bevans maintains that it is in continuity with traditional theology. Doing theology, according to Bevans means taking account of both the past, that is to say in looking at both Scripture and tradition but also the present. In investigating the theology which is relevant to individuals, the process of contextualisation is integral to the process. It is not possible to separate their theology from their own personal and community context. What we are trying to do is from the individuals' perspective to formulate a theology which might be considered contemporary rural theology within the rural Church in Wales. This will involve taking account of all of the factors mentioned by Bevans.

Relatively little empirical research appears to have been done on the actual theology of individual believers; the works by Francis (1985; 1996) and by Harris and Startup (1999), however, present some relevant findings in relation to the context from which these individual believers come. The study by Harris and Startup is a sociological analysis of various benefices. As well as presenting a statistical analysis and overview of the make-up of the churches, the authors conducted a questionnaire survey on the beliefs both religious and social held by the congregation. One point

emerges from their contrasting studies with clergy and laity respectively. Whereas the Church would maintain that the distinction between ordained and laity and between priest and Bishop, for example, is that of roles, the laity in the Harris and Startup survey (1999) view themselves as second-class citizens, whose function it is to 'serve' the vicar. Harris and Startup analysed questionnaire data from 803 completed responses from benefices across the six dioceses in Wales. The section on religious beliefs concentrated on five topics: the nature of the church, its structure, ecumenism, change in the church and the relationship between the Church and the world. Although not directly relevant either by method or in terms of their findings to this study, the results from Harris and Startup provide some interesting contextual background to the beliefs of a fairly representative sample of churchgoers in Wales. The method used was to ask respondents to react to a set of three statements on each of the topics. The results showed that in relation to church, the majority (69%) agreed with the *via media* in relation to church position (that is as opposed to the catholic or evangelical position). In terms of the structure of the church 92% agreed with the statement which referred to the church as the Body of Christ but that in addition the church was seen by 64.7% as a collection of individuals more so than a collection of parishes. The other topic which is of relevance for this study is the views expressed on the relationship between the church and the world. In this topic the first statement was that the church should take a stand against the world, the second that it was the duty of the church to serve everyone and the final statement presented the world as a target for evangelism. Nearly 90% agreed with both the statement on evangelisation and service. These rather basic findings are subjected to further more complex analysis by the authors of the study. However, these unrefined findings suffice to set the context of this study.

Two recent studies on the types of people who attend rural Anglican churches in Wales sheds interesting light on the context of this study. Although the current study does not focus on the psychological profile of those either in the study or in the churches, the information provided by Craig et al (2003) and Francis et al (2007) provides additional contextual factors. Previous work by Francis (1996) shows that there are two females to every male who attends church and that the post-retirement age is more represented than pre-retirement. This would confirm anecdotal and observed evidence. These more recent studies add psychological profiles to the previous evidence. The Jungian psychological indicators developed by Myers-Briggs (Kendall, 1998) are used in these studies. Profiles emerge on four bipolar preferences: (Introvert/Extrovert; Sensing/Intuition; Thinking/Feeling; Judging/Perceiving) which together result in 16 psychological types. The study by Craig et al (2003) was conducted with 101 churchgoers, of which 65% were female, in three rural benefices in the Church in Wales. It reported 55% reporting SFJ, that is to say those which were sensing/feeling/judging. This study aggregated results of males and females together. In the later study by Francis et al (2007) they sought to replicate the results and disaggregate them and also to compare them to population norms. In this study a total of 185 people (72% female) completed a questionnaire. The result of the study confirmed those of the previous one with 60% of the females in the study indicating SFJ, compared with the population average of 37%. Among males in the study 46% of them were in the SFJ region, as opposed to 13% in the population. Francis et al conclude that the over-representation of those in churches who are sensing/feeling/judging leads to under-representation of other types. The introverted SFJ person is profiled as follows:

Quiet, friendly, responsible and conscientious. Work devotedly to meet their obligations. Lend stability to any project or group. Thorough, painstaking, accurate. Their interests are usually not technical. Can be patient with necessary details. Loyal considerate, perceptive, concerned with how people feel (Myers, 1998: 7, cited in Francis et al, 2007: 28).

The extroverted SFJ personality is:

Warm-hearted, talkative, popular, conscientious, born co-operators, active committee members. Need harmony and may be good at creating it. Always doing something nice for someone. Work best with encouragement and praise. Main interest is in things that directly and visibly affect people's lives (ibid.)

The researchers conclude that these are the very types of people who would be attracted to an indiscriminate call to come into church and to contribute to the work of church life. They suggest that churches with such members should work to their strengths and that others who are seeking different expressions of church may seek to target those under-represented groups. It is beyond the scope of this study to focus any further on these profiles, but it is necessary to bear them in mind when contextualising the responses of the participants in this study to questions of theological but also practical significance within the church in Wales.

Belonging is a concept which permeates the Old Testament and indeed follows on from the ministry of Jesus into the church. Walker (2006) suggests that from the divine belonging there follow four aspects of belonging as a theological concept particular to the rural context: belonging with people, activities, events and places. He contrasts the commitment required, for example to belong to the church in general, including worship services and on-going activities, to being associated and involved in events which take place, many of them on an annual basis such as harvest Thanksgiving or the annual fete. From observation of four rural churches recently, this would substantiate my observation that the whole village seemed to come to

annual events, in particular fund-raising events for the church, contrasted with the few regulars who worship on Sundays. Nevertheless, the aspect of belonging was vital to the community in general. Similarly belonging with place; Walker maintains that the church and churchyard are in many villages the focal point and are seen as being *spiritual space* (Walker, 2006: 95). Again from informal observation this would be confirmed.

Summary

This concludes the literature review. It has sought to bring a theological framework, albeit in various sections, to the study. Firstly there was discussion of theology and, particularly what might be termed 'ordinary theology', secondly it focused on the role of learning in the context of theology; thirdly it discussed the relationship between language and theology and theological language in particular and finally presented contextual factors as a preamble to this study. The following chapter situates the current study in a methodological framework and justifies the method chosen for the empirical work.

Chapter 3

Methodology and methods

Introduction

This chapter deals both with methodological considerations and outlines the main method and instrument adopted in the study. The chapter sets out a justification for adopting a social sciences methodology for a study of theology. It then presents the methodological paradigm for the study examining the areas of phenomenology, hermeneutics and hermeneutic phenomenology. Finally it looks at the main research instrument to be used, namely semi-structured interview, outlining the positive and negative features of this instrument; issues relating to reliability and validity are raised. Ethical considerations are also highlighted and the procedures adopted within the study described and justified in detail. The chapter concludes by presenting details of the subjects involved in the study and by situating them in their respective context.

Theology and the social sciences

As stated in the literature review in the previous chapter ordinary theology is a sub-set of practical theology. One of the major theoretical debates surrounding research within practical theology is the relationship between theology and the social sciences. Cartledge (2003) notes that the relationship between the two disciplines has been fraught. Criticising other theologians who dismiss the social sciences as so-called 'dialogue partners', Cartledge (2003) argues that for practical theology which is directed at interacting with people in real social contexts, it is essential to engage

empirical methods in researching practical theology. In justifying an approach to researching theology which incorporates qualitative research methods, Swinton and Mowat state that:

> *[w]hat holds practical theology together as a discipline is its perspective on a beginning-point in human experience and its desire to reflect theologically on that experience* (2006: v).

The advantage of adopting a qualitative approach is that, according to Swinton and Mowat, it enables the researcher to penetrate the normal and see what is going on behind the veil. In using the tools of social sciences, however, the researcher of theology must exercise caution since, they maintain:

> *Left to their own devices, such sources of knowledge can easily subsume theology and orient the theological task towards goals and assumptions that are inappropriate and theologically questionable* (Swinton and Mowat, 2006: vii).

Research within the area of practical theology can be situated in various other disciplines. Swinton and Mowat (2006: 3) list them as empirical, political, ethical, psychological, sociological, gender-oriented and narrative based. It is the complexity of the discipline noted in chapter 2 which necessitates flexible approaches to investigating its complexity. Lichtman (2006: 21)) states that it is a field which is both multi-dimensional and fluid and *that it relies heavily on the voices of humans*.

According to Christie (2005: 21), citing Heitink (1999) practical theology which concentrates on the experience of human beings must be *characterized by a methodology that takes empirical data with utter seriousness*. Astley (2002, chapter 4, 97ff.) states that in order to research ordinary theology, *a range of appropriate*

tools from the armoury of the social sciences will be necessary, such as participant observation, unstructured or semi-structured interviews. The advantage of such methods is that they can provide rich data; the negative side is that they are time-consuming and can realistically be applied to small samples only. As the present study is a small-scale study, these methods are entirely appropriate and realistic. According to Heitink (1993), however, taking an empirical approach to theology must be accompanied by a theological perspective. Cartledge (2003) credits van der Ven as the main advocate of using social science methods in theology. He proposes an intra-disciplinary model which links both the theological and empirical. The other approach which can be adopted is the inter-disciplinary model as for example the one used by Kay and Francis (1985). Interdisciplinary research can take one of four forms, according to Cartledge (2003: 13f.): a) It can be a reassessment of the content of one discipline with that of another; b) It can be an amalgamation of two discrete disciplines according to different criteria, thereby creating a new discipline; c) An *ad hoc* approach can be used; d) an approach is adopted which satisfies the criteria of both disciplines. Kay and Francis interpret inter-disciplinary as the final option, i.e. they seek to use an approach which is valid equally for both disciplines. Cartledge (2003) notes two problems with this interpretation. The first criticism is that the definition of the inter-disciplinary approach is based on the competence of the researcher and not on the discipline *per se*; as the two areas in which Kay and Francis are working, namely religion and education, are themselves disciplines made up of other disciplines, the boundaries are not as tightly defined as Kay and Francis might argue. The second criticism which Cartledge notes is that if the definition of the disciplines depends on the researcher, there might be difficulties for the researcher who operates in innovative ways. Cartledge (2003) discusses the multi-disciplinary

model which proposes a two-phased approach where a topic investigated according to social science methods is then subject to further theological reflection.

Van der Ven's (1999) intra-disciplinary model requires theology itself to become empirical and to expand the variety and range of research instruments used. Whereas theology has traditionally used literary-historical and systematic methods and techniques, the social sciences offer a wider variety of instruments such as questionnaires, interviews, focus groups etc. to enable the researcher to focus on the individual in a social context. According to Coleman this intra-disciplinary model refers to the act of borrowing concepts, techniques or methods and integrating them into another area (cited by Cartledge, 2003: 16). In summarising the intra- and inter-disciplinary approaches, Cartledge states that whilst Kay and Francis' approach may be the most rigorous, researchers within the domain of practical theology will opt in the main for the intra-disciplinary approach represented by van der Ven.

Researching and interpreting people's beliefs

In researching the topic of churchgoers' beliefs and practices, this study adopts what is termed a hermeneutical-phenomenological approach, that is to say one which is both descriptive but also which interprets. This section looks in more detail, first at phenomenology and then hermeneutics before discussing a compound or hybrid methodology.

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a method (Lichtman, 2006: 68). It is the study of the life-world, according to Swinton and Mowat, that is to say the world before we reflect on it. They define it as: *a philosophy of experience that attempts to*

understand the ways in which meaning is constructed in and through human experience. McLeod (2001: 56 – cited in Swinton and Mowat, 2006: 106) states that phenomenology *seeks to set aside any assumptions about the object of inquiry and build up a thorough and comprehensive description of the 'thing itself'.* According to Van Manen, (cited in Swinton and Mowat, 2006: 106.), the question which phenomenology asks is 'What is this or that kind of experience like?' In asking this question it differs from other sciences in not attempting to explain or interpret the phenomenon. The effect that phenomenological knowledge can have on us is that it prompts the researcher to more thoughtful action (van der Zalm, 2000, cited by Swinton and Mowat: 107) or, in other words, it encourages those observing the phenomena to look at something differently and to respond differently to it. Christie (2005: 24 and footnote) uses the term 'thick' description to refer to the result of a phenomenological investigation, a term which was introduced into the social sciences by Geertz and from philosophy by Ryle. Christie refers to the process of understanding of the phenomena which comes from 'empathic indwelling of the phenomenon' (Christie, op cit.: 24) or *Verstehen*. In order to understand the phenomenon in this way, the observer must remain detached or unbiased, leaving aside their own values and prejudgements. The difficulty with the descriptive or phenomenological approach is that it is difficult to see how this can be achieved. Every observer of phenomena has their own views of the subject and cannot react to them in a neutral way. Although a degree of interpretation involved in any descriptive research, phenomenology is the attempt *to describe and understand the essence of lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon* (Lichtman, 2006: 27).

Hermeneutics is the process of interpretation but is, according to Swinton and Mowat not something simply that people do. It is, rather, what people *are*, in the view of Gadamer (1982), that is to say that people always make sense of the world through interpretation. To this extent, therefore, hermeneutics is ontological and not simply epistemological (*ibid.*). Swinton and Mowat (2006: 108) state that human beings make sense of the world by using complex hermeneutical processes which occur *implicitly and explicitly, reflectively and unreflectively*. In this sense description is also hermeneutical since the act of describing involves the act of interpreting. Browning (1991: 47f.) states that theology should start with 'descriptive theology' (cited in Christie, 2005: 25), with the 'theory-laded practices that give rise to the practical questions that generate all theological reflection'. Phenomenology and hermeneutics have some features in common, outlined by Swinton and Mowat (2006: 108). They both:

- assume construction of a social world and its meanings for reflexive human beings (citing McLeod 2001, 57);

- rely on language as central to the process of investigation;

- are concerned with understanding.

Swinton and Mowat (2006) comment that phenomenology and hermeneutics present a challenge to positivism and they have emerged as research methods partly due to dissatisfaction with the scientific approach (citing Ryan, 1996) and it is their similarities which set them apart from the approach adopted by the natural sciences.

The complementary nature of these two approaches is recognised in the research method which is referred to as hermeneutic phenomenology, which, by bringing the two strands together, provides *a rich description of the experience and a necessary*

interpretative perspective on lived experience (Swinton and Mowat, 2006: 109).

Researchers who use this hybrid paradigm locate it within the philosophical domain of Gadamer (1982), for example the works of Browning (1991), Swinton and Mowat (2006) and Christie (2005). In order to situate Gadamer's thoughts in context, it is necessary to contrast them with those of Wilhelm Dilthey and Edmund Husserl. Dilthey maintained that understanding is achieved by empathy which involved the emptying oneself of one's own prejudices and appreciating the situation from the standpoint of those within it. Husserl thought that one described situations through a process of bracketing by which he meant suspending one's beliefs and preconceptions in order to see a situation as it actually was (see Swinton and Mowat, 2006: 111). Gadamer discounted this phenomenology as impossible and indeed not useful in achieving understanding. He uses the metaphor of a 'conversation' to describe human understanding and he maintained that it was important to use one's prejudices and prejudgements in achieving understanding of others' situations. Therefore his hermeneutical phenomenological stance contrasted markedly with the phenomenology of both Dilthey and Husserl. It is the contrast that results from comparing and contrasting our views with the situation being observed that we achieve a greater understanding. For him the importance lay not in the emptying of oneself but in the awareness of one's own prejudices and prejudgements:

> *To try to eliminate one's own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible, but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to use one's own preconceptions so that the meaning of the text can really be made to speak for us* (Gadamer, 1982: 358)

He refers to this as the 'dialectic of experience' which refers to the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself (Gadamer, 1982: 335). New experiences widen our horizons so that we can experience other situations in light of

the new experiences. In engaging in the conversation between the researcher and the researched, Gadamer refers to the term 'fusion of horizons' by which he means the coming together of the world of the researcher with the world of the researched phenomena. The task of the researcher in examining the text of the researched is not to bracket their own perspective but rather to fuse their views or 'horizons' with those of the research participants in order to clarify the significance of the object of research. In the case of this theological discussion, therefore, it is essential for the researcher to be aware of his own theological position in order to be sensitive to the areas where any prejudices may contrast or conflict with the perspectives adopted by the research participants. In the words of Christie:

Describing someone else's theology is thus a hermeneutical process, involving an interpretive dialogue or conversation between the theological pre-understandings of the researcher and those of her interviews (2005: 27).

Indeed it is essential for an understanding to take place for the researcher to engage in conversation with the participants and to be sensitive to what the participants actually mean; the role of language is crucial in the interview situation. Swinton and Mowat (2006: 116) note that individual words are only determined by the context in which they are used: *the meaning of the word emerges from its interaction with its wider context of other words or sentences.* Similarly the sentence takes its meaning from its position within a paragraph and so on. The implication for the qualitative research process is that one needs to be aware of the so-called 'hermeneutical circle' (ibid) by which is meant the moving backwards and forwards between words and texts to arrive at the meaning.

In this section the concepts of phenomenology and hermeneutics have been examined and the domain of hermeneutical phenomenology defined. The approach in this dissertation will attempt to steer a course between description and interpretation but at all times the researcher will need to remain aware of his own theological position in order to separate it from that of the research participants but also to use it as a means of comparing and contrasting his views with those of the participants. It is hoped that the worlds of the research participants will be revealed in sharp focus, set against the background of the world of the researcher in conversation, in places in harmony with, at other times standing in contrast to that theological position. Astley puts it thus:

> *[I]n describing your theology I am implicitly engaged in a conversation between my theology and yours, at least to some extent. My perspective influences what comes to my attention as I listen to you talk about, and see you practise, your faith; in deed it influences what it is that I am capable of seeing and hearing, and what I take seriously in what you say* (Astley, 2002: 109).

Citing Browning (1991: 286) he continues: *Listening is never perfectly neutral' it is itself a theological act – an act of 'descriptive theology'.*

In investigating ordinary theology, therefore, it is necessary both to describe it and to subject it to theological critique (Astley, 2002: 108; Christie, 2005: 42). The joint process of hermeneutical phenomenology best describes the approach which is adopted in this study.

The research interview

The previous two sections have sought to justify use of a social science approach to investigating theology. This section looks in greater detail at the chosen instrument, namely the research interview. There are of course various kinds of interview such as

the focused interview, the semi-structured interview, the group interview. In contrasting the tool of interview with questionnaire, Cohen and Manion (1994: 272) note some of the advantages of the former as providing extensive opportunities for exploring key issues and for probing but having the limitations of the huge amount of data which have to be coded. They state that there are three purposes which the research interview might serve: first as a means of gathering information which is of direct relevance to the research objectives; secondly it may be used to test hypotheses or to suggest new hypothesise or thirdly it may be used in combination with other research methods.

The aim of this study was to explore in-depth the theological perspectives of a small number of individuals so that the interview is regarded as the most effective way of obtaining the information. Christie (2005: 38) points out one caveat in the theological research situation in that the researcher is involved in a dialogue with people who are not used to talking about such issues or *not given to that sort of talk* (citing Hopewell, 1987: 90). It is necessary therefore for the interviewer to be sensitive to this and to be conscious of the type of questions asked; particular sensitivity is required to ensure that the questions are not overloaded with jargon and to be sure that the participants as far as possible actually understand what is being asked.

In dealing with a subject such as theology which for many in the Church context will be as bewildering as nuclear physics, the choice of questions and the expressions used to elicit information of what is 'within' is vital. Astley tells of his initial attempts to get students of theology to engage in a task of identifying the formative factors in shaping their Christian beliefs. He narrates:

I invited them to respond by reference to such factors as <u>reason</u>, <u>revelation</u> in <u>scripture</u> and tradition, <u>experience</u> (broadly conceived) and culture. [...] I discovered that my innocent request was invariably met by total bewilderment and an embarrassed silence (2002: 14; emphasis in original).

When he abandoned this approach and got them to speak outside the rigid categories, they referred to *people, sermons and services, and significant events and periods in their own and others' lives (ibid.)*. They also referred to changes in their beliefs and the depth of their belief as a result of suffering or joy and spoke about learning experiences which had helped them in their Christian life.

If this is the experience of one very experienced theological researcher with a group of more theologically aware participants than the rest of the general public, it is evident just how difficult a task it will be encouraging those with no theological training to engage in a process of discussion about their faith. Astley provides little encouragement on this:

Yet it is never going to be an easy task. Religious faith has deep roots; it is deeply rooted in the tangled morass of the mangrove swamps that constitute our lives. And down below those murky waters, our faith is anchored in even murkier mud. It is only when it grows up into the light and publicly spreads its branches of beliefs and values that we – and others – can get a good view of what it looks like (Astley, 2002: 14).

Despite the difficulties, Astley encourages perseverance as it is in persevering that we will come to a greater understanding of the beliefs of ordinary folk.

Constructing the interview

In order to formulate questions which would not be too laden with jargon, or expressed in such theological language that they would alienate the participants and

mystify them or intimidate them, it was decided to construct the questions from the bottom up. The congregations of three different types of churches were asked to suggest questions which, in their opinion, would allow the researcher to gain information on people's beliefs and practices. The result of this request was a number of questions from very few church members. These questions were grouped by the researcher according to common themes and augmented in each of these sections. The resulting interview schedule was then sent to ten individuals, including those who had submitted original questions, other academics who had connections with the rural churches and to both supervisors. The revised interview schedule was then used as a pilot on one participant. Following the pilot interview the participant was presented with the written schedule and asked to comment on the questions as she had heard and responded to them. As a result of the pilot interview the only change made to the interview schedule was to omit or drastically shorten the section on the Creed; questions on belief were integrated into the other questions as opposed to an individual section devoted to the tenets of the faith. The data from the pilot interview are included with the main data in the following chapter since there were no discernible differences between the two data sets. The finalised interview is presented in Appendix D.

Reliability and validity

Both reliability and validity are relevant to the semi-structured interview as research instrument. Reliability refers to the ability of the instrument to be replicated so that the findings are reliable. Validity, on the other hand, is required to ensure that the instrument actually elicits what it is supposed to find out. In a small scale study such as this the latter is more important than the former. Cohen and Manion (1994) point

out that in terms of interviews the main way to achieve greater validity of the instrument is to minimise bias such as interviewer bias, the tendency of the interviewer to interpret the respondents' responses in light of their own image and the substantive content of the questions. These have already been highlighted as issues which have been taken into consideration and attempts have been made to minimise these effects; the transcripts were viewed by the supervisor and comments made on possible interpretations.

With small-scale studies such as this, where no generalisations are being made from individual respondents, the issue of reliability should not give too much cause for concern.

Sample

The vicars of three churches were contacted and given an initial information sheet about the study. Information sheets, both initial and more detailed, are presented in Appendix A. The vicars were asked to announce the study and to distribute the leaflets to anyone who was interested. Individuals contacted the researcher directly so that the vicars did not know who had agreed to take part in the study. In total 15 people contacted the researcher declaring an interest in the project; of these 15 only 13 were interviewed; the one criterion used for de-selection was simply that they were last to respond. By the time the final two women contacted the researcher, 13 people had been interviewed and there was a certain degree of 'saturation' by that stage. Details of the participants are presented in Appendix B; the list reveals that there was an imbalance between female and male respondents which would be illustrative of the balance within the church context. There was a relatively even divide between Welsh

and English respondents, although many of the English participants had lived in the area and had been members of the rural churches there for some years; again the balance would be typical of the rural churches in this particular area which is very popular with English people as a location for retirement.

Interviewees were given the choice of venue for the interview; details of the location and the time of day at which the interview was conducted is presented in Appendix B. The duration of the interviews ranged from 50 minutes to over an hour. The pilot interview which ran to 1 hour 10 minutes was seen to be too long and some initial questions, particularly those relating to the Creed, were not asked in the main interviews. The interviews were recorded using an unobtrusive Panasonic IC recorder. They were subsequently transferred to the PC, converted to Wave files and were transcribed using ExpressWrite software. The pilot interview was conducted in October 2007 and the remaining interviews in January 2008.

Observation

Although a minor part of the research method, the presence of the researcher in the three churches over a period of at least 15 weeks, including Sundays and evening activities, gave an insight into the theology of the church and the practices of priests and congregations. The field notes generated from these were written up *post hoc* and were supplemented by impressions gained by the researcher which found further evidence in the responses during the interviews. It is also necessary to bear in mind the fact that the researcher was known to the participants and had been, to some extent, a participant-observer in the three congregations as this could have influenced the responses given by the participants in the interviews. A positive feature of this

fact was the willingness of the participants to be interviewed. None of the participants had been involved in any academic or theological study and they could have been intimidated by the questioning of an 'outsider'; as the researcher was known to them, they were relatively at ease and felt they could talk freely. The negative corollary of this is, of course, that they could be trying to help the researcher out by saying what they think the researcher wanted to hear. Attempts were made to avoid this by assuring them that there were no right and wrong answers to the questions and that they could tell the researcher anything they wanted; that the vicars or those in authority would not be informed of their views and that since nobody had asked them their views in the past, this was a new study which will be of interest anyway.

The data on observation are presented as an Appendix C; they are illustrative of the contexts from which the interviewees came and are not used to any great extent in the analysis of the results. The observations are, after all, filtered through the researcher's lens and therefore would not bring any more objectivity to the discussion.

Ethical considerations

Any research involving human subjects needs to take account of the ethical dimension. The research design was subject to the protocol set out in the Cardiff University guidelines. All participants were informed of the subject of the research and those who agreed to be interviewed completed the requisite consent form. Participants and clergy were assured of anonymity and, therefore, all non-essential information is anonymised in the study. Participants were given details of the scope of their involvement in the interviews and were also informed of the origin of the

questions, that is to say, they were told it was a study about their beliefs made up of salient areas for exploration which had been identified from their own context. The interviewees were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason for withdrawing their participation. In order to retain anonymity as far as possible (considering the close-knit nature of the communities), some further measures have been adopted in the study. The codes in the final written-up version were changed from the original codes allocated to the participants. Only the individuals themselves are aware of the two codes. Where details could be attributed to individuals, the nature of these details was changed, for example reference to a geographical area or to family members. Thirdly, where sensitive data were revealed by a participant and where the revelation of such data could lead to identification of the individual participant by linking to the code (F1 etc. or M1 etc.), quotations were not attributed to an individual code, either female or male. It was considered more important to be able to present the data in order to illustrate deeply felt incidents or facts, than to include the origin of the quotation and risk revealing the identity of the interviewees. Although this may appear over-sensitive, some of the interviewees divulged very personal historical facts which could leave them vulnerable, and it was considered a necessary step to retain the confidence of those who had participated. Where the identity of a participant is deliberately withheld, it is indicated by the symbols [-] following the quotation to show that this is not a typographical omission but a deliberate convention.

Problems in method

Having chosen and justified the choice of the semi-structured interview as the research instrument to be used in the study, it is necessary at this point to highlight

some of the difficulties with this approach, particularly in interviewing participants who may not have been formally interviewed in this context before and may not have had to reflect on or had to articulate their beliefs before. Christie (2005: 43ff.), whose work in terms of design is very similar to this, highlights a number of difficulties which emerged in the course of her study. Not wishing to reinvent the wheel, I note here, referring to the original sources used by Christie, the main areas of concern prior to conducting the interviews. Following the study I will add any other problems which emerged during the course of the interview process and data analysis.

Participants may not have given any thought previously to the questions being asked. Quoting Towler (1974), Christie points out that answers to specific questions may be misinterpreted to represent the participants' ideas rather than their spontaneous reaction to specific questions or stimuli at that time. Christie contrasts this view with the alternative, that in responding to questions they hear for the first time, they actually DO articulate what had been previously unexpressed views. Astley (2002: 103) states it as follows: *Now that I think about it, I realise that I do believe a and b, and I don't believe c and d* (cited in Christie, 2005: 44). As a result people sometimes by taking part in the research interviews, are forced to look at their own views and discover their own beliefs in the process (citing Hay and Hunt, 2000). The danger of this phenomenon, of course, is that the researcher needs to exercise caution in interpreting the finding, lest it not represent what is the true view of the respondent. In guarding against this, Christie recommends encouraging participants not to respond to questions on which they have no opinions. This honesty is also important in order to ensure that participants do not feel pressurised to come up with ready made answers for every question. The other danger is that the interview data can be limited

by the questions and prompts used by the interviewer; this is mentioned in the next section which outlines the main limitations of this study. Interpretation of the data is also a problematic area; the researcher will have difficulty at times interpreting the language both in terms of vocabulary, idiom and syntax used by the interviewees. At this stage the reader is referred back to the previous chapter and the section on God-talk which highlights some of the issues.

Triangulation

It is thought that triangulation can bring more credibility to a piece of research. Lichtman (2006) states that it is a concept used by traditionalists. There are, according to Guion (2002) five types of triangulation – data, investigator, theory, methodological and environmental (cited by Lichtman, 2006: 193). Triangulation can be used both to quantitative and qualitative studies, according to Gorard with Taylor (2004) and is a simple way of combining data from different sources. They note criticisms of this approach, in particular that it is based on the assumption that a singled reality can be converged on through the use of more than one method and they state that it is the subject of much confusion.

In this study it could be argued that triangulation is attempted in terms of method but both sources of empirical data are qualitative. A weak form of triangulation could be argued in the use of brief notes following observation of 15 weeks in each of the churches and informal contact with many of the participants over a two-year period. Additionally informal discussions with the vicars of each of the churches both prior to and following the interviews, provided some valuable insights into their perceptions. The review of the literature provides a further lens through which to view the data

generated by the interviews. Finally the involvement of two other interpreters to the data (supervisors and transcriber) could be seen as a weak form of triangulation of investigator. No generalisations will follow from the findings and no major claims will be made as a result.

It is of course important to ensure consistency both in terms of the questions asked and to attempt to ensure that the interpretation of the data is consistent and accurate. In order to raise the level of objectivity, the questions were subject to a filter by six individuals from various backgrounds, including clergy, researchers and lay people in churches. In addition, following one interview, the questions and prompts were discussed with the supervisor to ensure that there was broad coverage and to discuss areas which could have been explored but which had not been followed up. At the analysis stage, the coding of one transcript was verified by one of the supervisors.

The researcher

In conducting research which involves a substantial level of interpretation on the part of the researcher, it is important to declare my own interests at this stage. Any researcher no matter how he/she might try, cannot come to a research context with a blank sheet; he/she has his/her own particular background, history and experience and these all contribute to the lens through which the research is viewed, described and interpreted. The Christian background of the researcher also influences the types of questions asked, the way in which they are asked and the follow-up prompts considered appropriate to use. The researcher is also regarded as a participant in the research process, particularly from the point of view of those being interviewed since

they do not regard the researcher as a blank sheet or as an unbiased scribe of the material used.

I am originally from a Presbyterian Church background but made a formal commitment of faith and was subsequently baptised in the Baptist denomination and have at various times in my life been part of Free Evangelical, Baptist, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Brethren and, finally Anglican churches. At the time of conducting the research I was in training as a non-stipendiary ordinand. My sponsoring church is one of the largest Anglican churches within the Church in Wales which would be Conservative Evangelical with charismatic tendencies; the participants in the research are aware of that part of my background. As part of my training I have spent at least 15 weeks in the churches from which I selected the participants of the research. It is difficult to predict what 'hat' the participants will see me as wearing. The danger is that they consider me to be more 'theologically intellectual' than they are or that they think I have a set of correct theological answers to the questions and wrong answers will result in disapproval. When it became know in my sponsoring church that I intended conducing interviews with people, one woman commented: *I'm not letting you interview me because you will find out just how heretical some of my views are.* The danger of people saying what they think I wanted to hear cannot be discounted but is very difficult to gauge.

I firmly believe in the authority of the Bible, am convinced that people need to make a commitment to Jesus and to follow Him in order to be regarded as 'Christians'. I have come to see the need for social engagement of the church but put more emphasis on the need for personal Salvation. I am relatively new to the *Prayer Book* and to the

more formal structure of liturgy within the service and have come to appreciate the significant place of the Eucharist within the Anglican tradition and within the theological psyche of many of those who attend the Church in Wales. I am more aware than I was of the use of certain key terms within the Conservative-Evangelical vocabulary which can be used by those of that tradition without their actually understanding the true meaning. I am rather unfamiliar with the language which may form part of the vocabulary of those not from that tradition; it is therefore with some trepidation that I seek to tease out the underlying deep structure of ordinary theology from those with whom I have only a recent history.

Analysis of data

Following full transcription of the 12 interviews (13 interviewees), consideration was given to how the data should be analysed. Initial consideration was given to the qualitative research tool NVivo 8 and the researcher undertook introductory training in using the tool. On further reflection, however, and taking advice from colleagues who had used software and those who had not, it was decided that the time it would take to re-package the interviews in order to make them compatible with the software would outweigh any advantage of using the software tool. The advice 'simply know your transcripts well' was heeded and a manual analysis was undertaking using the coding categories outlined in the Appendix F. The coding categories were drawn up after analysis of one transcript and subject then to four revisions following analysis of subsequent transcripts; those transcripts which had been coded according to earlier coding categories were re-coded. Codes were discussed with the supervisor and the transcriber.

Each transcript was manually coded then analysed systematically according to the domains identified in the coding.

Summary

This chapter has situated the study within a methodological framework. A brief justification for exploring theology with a social science method was presented followed by a section on phenomenology and hermeneutics and the combined approach referred to as hermeneutical phenomenology. The main instrument for capturing the data was discussed in detail and the pros and cons thereof analysed.

The next chapter combines presentation of the results with initial discussion of these results, relating them to other similar studies and to the salient points raised in the literature in chapter 2.

Astley (2004) states that listening is important particularly for those engaged in ministering and providing pastoral care for those who might be called 'ordinary' believers. This listening should include what Astley calls theological listening (2004: 126), that is to say listening out for theology, because the speech of average believers, albeit halting and inarticulate, can and does constitute a form of theology. According to Browning (1991: 286) listening is not neutral and is the first part of the dialogue and listening is therefore part of the theological conversation which takes place between the interviewee and the interviewer. Astley points out that the value in listening is in discovering the richness of the personal theological story told by ordinary believers:

Such an ordinary theology may lack the systematic coherence of more literate forms, but it will often make up for this deficit by revealing a closer connection with the religious impulses and with their outworkings in secular living. In other words, it will be closer both to faith and to life (Astley, 2004: 126).

The rest of this study is aimed at letting the people speak.

Chapter 4

Presentation and discussion of results

The final section of the previous chapter outlined the methods used for the analysis of the data from the interviews. This chapter presents the information according to the first three research questions set out in chapter 1 which are re-stated here for ease of reference:

- What are the main beliefs of ordinary churchgoers?

- How do these churchgoers express their beliefs?

- From where do churchgoers gain their theology and how do they develop in their understanding of what they believe?

This chapter will be followed by a broader discussion in chapter 5 of the extent to which these findings constitute ordinary theology, examining the data in light of the work by Astley (2002) and the later work of Astley and Christie (2007).

In presenting and discussing the findings from the interviews, in addition to highlighting relevant aspects from the literature reviewed in chapter 2, comparative data from other contemporary studies or studies conducted in the Welsh context will be touched upon. The main studies which will feature are those by Cruchley-Jones (2001) and the volume of studies edited by the same author (Cruchley-Jones, 2008). Although differing in method and in theoretical framework, the findings from some of these studies provide some interesting comparative data because they are asking the same and similar questions of ordinary congregation members based in English or Welsh contexts. The similarity of the projects contained in the volume entitled *God at Ground Level* can be seen from the summary presented by Cruchley-Jones:

People have been asked questions about church, about God, about life today. Some have considered the relationship to the spiritual and others to the future of the church. Some have offered biblical models, others have described experiences of the church that confirm or refute the analysis of secularization. [the methods] resist the tidiness of the ordered academic approach. Our method presupposes that people at ground level have something to offer our theological task, but this contribution will be varied, rich and contradictory (2008: 120f.)

It will be seen that the findings of the interviews in this study reveal many of the features of these other contemporary projects taking place across other parts of the UK, although this one appears to be unique in its rural context.

In order to illustrate the evidence for each of the questions above, quotations will be taken from the 12 interviews. For clarity in reading the quotations below, a short explanation about the transcription convention is required. The dots thus ... between words indicate hesitation on the part of the speaker. The dots in square brackets [...] indicate a break in the quotation, that is to say that the section following the square brackets is taken from a later part of the interview; it may be only a few words or a few sentences later or may be added from a later section. There should still be coherence to the utterance, however. It should be noted that the evidence presented to answer the research questions did not emerge chronologically from the interview.

- **Research Question 1 – What are the major beliefs of ordinary churchgoers?**

To answer this question, the focus will be on three main domains which emerged during the course of the interviews, namely those on faith, practice and church; some

isolated evidence from wider aspects of the interviews also informs this research question.

Faith

The initial questions in this domain asked about people's view of faith and being a Christian, for example:

- *What does being a Christian mean to you?*

- *What is the most important aspect of faith for you?*

- *How would you explain faith in a couple of sentences?*

One of the difficulties in grappling with this topic is that of vocabulary. Most of the people interviewed did not appear to be familiar with the terminology which would be second nature to those from a more openly evangelistic tradition. Despite this several commented on the relational aspect of Christianity, that you needed to have a personal relationship with God/Jesus. Some testified to experiencing an unseen presence which they either felt or imagined, someone behind or beside them, helping them. Others related faith to works and noted that you cannot believe if you do not act. In some cases it became rather tautological in that Christians believe by having faith and that by having faith one is a Christian. Only one participant [F6], who came from an evangelical background, was confident in using the language of faith (as interpreted by the researcher from my background and experience – see chapter 3) and she was able to make connections and relate experiences of faith which would have been alien to most of the other interviewees. This person talked about a personal faith, being filled with the Holy Spirit, hearing God speak to her, seeing Jesus in front of her and her whole life lived by faith.

The quotations below illustrate interviewees grappling to express what for many of them was very difficult:

Oh, golly, umm... somebody who..tries..tries to live by um.. the teachings of the Bible, um, is faithful to God but, um... and who tries to apply God's teachings to their lives and how their lives influence others. [F2]

Yeah, you hear it inside you. Sometimes though, no you must decide for yourself as a human and other times you're told very very clearly 'go and do this'. [F6]

You can't explain it, but you might be thinking, like, I'm going to do so and so and then it's not a voice, but it's something that comes and says 'well no, don't do that now', you know [...] and I feel as if there's somebody telling me these things. I know it sounds... sounds... I don't know but there is there is, anyway now... a presence, yes. That somebody is looking after you. [F8]

Well, to me it's the way you live your life, it's the way you relate to others... just simple day to day living [...] Cos the way I see God it's like having somebody standing behind me that you can't see [...] I have a vision of Him as a strength behind me and if I sort of stand back and think, it gives me the strength if things are difficult because it's a sort of back-up, if you like... it's a very hard thing to explain. [F9]

Many examples were given at length of the participants acting out their faith in the community from helping with voluntary groups (F4, M3, F5), supporting neighbours (F4, F8), doing jobs for members of the community for no charge (M1), doing various jobs for the church to maintain the fabric (M2), all of which were narrated at length and which illustrated their actions as a demonstration of their faith. There was no sense that they were doing these things in order to gain acceptance as a Christian or of earning salvation; they were, rather, acting out of love of the community and of their fellow human beings. This was their theology at work, the outworking of their faith directing their lives and the way they responded to others. No-one talked about their actions as a means to evangelism or bringing people into church; the action was an end in itself. Nor did anyone seek credit for the action or even thanks; they just acted out of love. The flavour of the many detailed narratives can be summed up in the following:

We'll do anything for anybody. [...] I just loved 'er [elderly neighbour] and I says to my sister-in-law: 'I'm doing a bit of stew for M [neighbour]' and she says to me: 'your 'ouse is just like the Salvation Army' (laughs). [F4]

I said: 'if you're happy, I'm happy', I said and I think it is Christian. I'm there to help. Well, I thoroughly enjoyed doing it and they go and praise me but I don't do it for praise. I enjoy doing it. [M1]

Faith is seen by some as relationship with God:

He [God] is a friend, you know, yeah. [F3]

Yeah, yeah, a believer, you know. You gotta believe to be a Christian. [F4]

It means that there is someone there I can talk to without speaking, if you see what I mean, at any time about anything and gain comfort for it. I don't need books, I don't need the Bible, I don't need prayer books I don't need to be in church but there's somebody there who listens. [...] it's knowing that God is there and He's not sitting somewhere in the sky or on top of a tree. He's there behind you, sitting beside me. [...] Christians are...not just having kind thoughts and using their prayers but it's also doing practical things. [F5]

To me, faith gives me an inner peace. And my faith, I know that God is always there and that...that's the only way I can describe it. It gives me inner peace. I stop sometimes and I just feel so... so happy and so peaceful. I mean, it's even when I'm working so it's not that you know only when I'm not stressed. [F7]

Faith for some was demonstrated by deep spiritual experiences:

Jesus comes into you...He says it plainly... so apart from my head believing it...it's just inside me as I look. I know in my knower, as they say. [F6]

The Holy Spirit came deep inside me. And he went down so deep that I didn't know I went that deep. I thought 'good heavens, what are you doing?' and I thought 'yeah, do it, do it more'. So that was a high point but it wasn't a church or the church that did that [F6]

From the excerpts above there are examples in which people are struggling with words to express the inexpressible. The following example is an illustration of the interviewer and interviewee struggling to understand one another:

> Researcher [R]: *would you say you have a living faith?*
> M2: *A living faith? I don't know what you mean. A living faith?*
> R: *Well I suppose I just...*
> M2: *Well, I'd never give the whole lot up or anything like that.*
> R: *Yeah..*
> M2: *Oh, no, I'm tremendously tolerant.*
> R: *I suppose what I mean by a living faith is something that influences your daily living.*
> M2: *Oh, as a source of..uh..yes, showing people how we belong with the whole outside world.*

In this example, it was clear that a gulf existed between the experience of the interviewer and the interviewee. The researcher had some difficulty actually understanding what this particular participant meant by faith and what he actually believed. For one person, the whole of faith is summed up in one concept, namely love (F9), although many of the quotations above would also demonstrate both love in relationship and love in action.

Church

The section which focused on their beliefs of church, the role of church and their place in it was much more productive than the previously discussed more abstract dimension of faith. It should be noted that the questions on church preceded those on faith, since it was considered an easier 'lead-in' to the interview.

The questions in this section ranged from their view of what constituted church to the relationship between God and the Church and their role as individuals in it. The building was seen by several of the interviewees to be more than just a building, but a special place, 'God's house' which should be respected and which provided comfort and a focus for prayer:

> F4: *Ah uh, but when I'm inside church I...I get a different feelin', you know, like as if it's more meaningful, you know [...] and I feel, I feel more at ease when I'm prayin' in church, quietly.*
> Researcher [R]: *What do you think it is about church? [...] Can you put your finger on it?*
> F4: *Yeah... I dunno whether it's because we call it God's 'ouse, you know, and I know I'm closer to 'im than I am in my own 'ome.*
> R: *Also being with other people, all focused on the same thing?*
> F4: *Yeah, but I'd still feel the same if I was on my own. [...] I don't know what the word I'm trying to look for is... it it means more to me, when I'm in church. I dunno, it's the atmosphere I think...*

The idea of it being God's house was taken up by another individual:

[...] but when you come out of church, to go home on Sunday; it's quite a sad time. I know we have been told we go to worship but we can worship every day but I have been told many a time before you're worshipping the building. It is not so. I go to the church, I've got love for the church. It is, after all, God's house. It is where he should be respected and everything you should be respectful in it [M1]

This interviewee was contrasting the fellowship experienced in the building when the people gathered together with criticism of not being able to distinguish the two. It is clear from his involvement in the fund-raising aspects relating to the building that he also did have a great respect for the bricks and mortar but he appeared to see them as a means to an end and not an end in itself. This individual had returned to church after a period of absence and he constantly referred back to his return:

'It's nice to have you back in church', he said. 'Do you know', I said, 'it's a real tonic', I said. 'Tonic', I said, 'Gospel truth', I said. I looked at the building. 'It's a real tonic', I said. [M1].

This being the case, it is hardly surprising to his associating the people with the location and providing the motivation for his fighting to keep the building open and to assure a future for it. He notes the importance of the need for the church community to be a welcoming one:

Well, it's like this. It is such a friendly place to be; the companionship and things. They are lovely people; we get on well together. [M1]

One other respondent mentioned the building and saw the structures as an impediment

to worshipping with others and creating a critical mass:

> R: *Could we do without the church building and just have people meeting in houses?*
> F8: *Well yes, because uh, you don't worship a building. I mean, it's a, I mean the church could go... you could say, meet in the village hall or whatever and all the denominations come together. I think it would be a good, really if we sort of, did get together more... say we had a service once a month or something, where the chapels and the church... all right, we could go to the chapel one Sunday and the chapel come back to us another. I mean, you don't worship a building.*

Commenting on the role of the church community and the building as a focus for

one's Christian beliefs, one person mentioned the fact that she believes a friend does

believe, having been brought up in a Christian family but that she does not at present

go to church:

No, I don't [think that you need to belong to a church to have faith]. Now do I want to say supplements or complements? Um.. complements I think, your faith. Lots of people say 'oh, you don't have to go', no, you don't have to go but you do need, you do need teaching sometimes, you do need to learn, don't you? [...] You do need to mix with people of the same belief and you um, you do have a friendship in a church that you don't get anywhere else. [F7]

The need for church to be a welcoming place both to those who are members and for

visitors is highlighted by others:

I've often wondered about that. I think friendliness, outgoing friendliness. [F5]

I mean, this is a very very friendly church [F1]

This, however, was not the experience of at least two people in the group when they

first arrived in their respective churches:

[...] but some people who shall remain nameless looked upon me, you know, I got the impression that... she's a new comer, which upset me a bit but I thought: oh come on, you can rise above that. [-]

Well I found the people very difficult, um (sighs). Oh, it was the older generation and it was their church and, you know, I was an incomer. I'm sure it wasn't intentional. I'm sure that they'd be horrified if they thought that I was saying anything. Most of them are gone now but you could not break the barrier. I was a non-Welsh speaker and it was a barrier that you could not break down and many a time I came home from church and cried, many a time, because I just wanted to get in but I couldn't. But I persevered because, you know, something was stopping me from leaving there and I think back on it now it was God saying: 'no, you're not going; you're going to persevere' and eventually the door was opened. [-]

Fortunately both of these people are now fully integrated into their respective churches but as a result of their experiences, they are acutely aware of the need for the church to be more open to others from the community who are not regular churchgoers as well as to those who move to the area.

Although not stated explicitly, most people saw the church as a community, one which supported its members and who were aware of each other both in church and in the wider community:

I would say, uh, well you see in our church congregation we got a good team spirit anyway. We don't really have to be brought together. We are mostly aware of one another and what our problems might be. [M2]

When challenged as to whether a building was necessary for a coming together in such a tightly knit community, this respondent was adamant that there was still a need to meet:

R: *But you raised a point earlier that is worth exploring where you talked about the church doesn't need to come together on a Sunday because we all know each other.*
M2: *Oh I didn't say we don't need to come together oh no no oh no we come together on a Sunday yes, that's part of our routine.*
R: *But what I was going to lead on to say was in a context where, as you say, the money is low, the buildings are requiring work, is there a continued role for a building in our community or can the church continue to exist you know, here or in someone else's house?*
M2: *No I don't think so, not very well.*
R: *What would miss, what would be missing?*
M2: *What would be missing? Well the missing uh the routine, uh just to say hello and farewell and attending church uh the team work within the church where we...I'm just going to walk onto some very thin ice here uh (laughs) where we sat together and we behaved, we go through the routine together, there is a togetherness which is re-enforced... in that building, in that place with the people who we can persuade to attend.*

This interviewee regarded the cohesion of the group being enhanced by the coming together. When he talked about routine, he seemed to be talking about more than the liturgy; he was referring to the meeting of each other in fellowship which was evidenced by their unison both in the recitation and in the singing.

For others the sense of community was seen to transcend the people. One person defined it as providing a feeling of comfort, the source of which was unclear, another explained it as a great strength:

I find the church is a great comfort and when I look back... I didn't realise how important the church was to me. It's only when I look back I realise. [...] Well, I don't know whether it's church or faith I found it when my father died... because I hadn't really been put to the test, if you know what I mean. [...] I felt it was a great comfort then. [F7]

Ah, I get a great strength from it. I went back after I lost my husband [...] I ought to have gone back to church a lot sooner but circumstances looking after [my husband] made it difficult. [F2]

Another interviewee referred to the church as transcending the structure and her place within it as flexible:

> F6: *I divided my time impartially between the chapel and the church. So I would improve my Welsh in the chapel and sing more because they have more hymns there. And, just go wherever the fellowship was.*
> R: *What is the most important aspect of church?*
> F6: *Meeting God...primarily, because some churches do not have fellowship. They meet liturgically to contact God. And others are really very friendly indeed and it's wonderful, but that can be different places, different countries, different branches, each one's different.*
> R: *Which do you prefer?*
> F6: *Pff... wherever I am, to be honest, wherever I am.*

The global nature of the church community is implied in this excerpt but it reflects the flexibility of this individual respondent whose experience of life was on a much broader horizon than all the other interviewees.

Another interviewee pointed out that although the church represented community, this did not necessarily mean that all those who were part of the church community were members of the faith community:

I mean, people go to church that doesn't necessarily mean that they are Christians. They might just go because they have got nowhere else to go on a Sunday morning. [...] It's not just simply what you do on a Sunday morning, there but that... well there should be more of the meaning. [F2]

This is echoed by one church member who stated that the actual village community in which she lives was, in times of need, closer to her literally and metaphorically than the church community to which she belonged:

[...] it was the neighbours I had to rely on and in the five months that I was not able to go to church, not able to drive and what have you, I mean it was the neighbours that sort of helped me along, to it does, expect [support] is alive in parts of the community, but I see more so with us in the country, I think, but in towns and urban areas perhaps it is not as uh.. prominent as in the country. [F8]

There was no criticism of the church implied in this statement but it illustrates the fact that the rural context provides community support within or without the church. It is a part of rural life which, this respondent suspects, is dying out in the town.

It is perhaps only to be expected that the participants were confident of the topic of the church because that is the most visible part of their faith and the aspect which identifies them as believers, that is to say going to church. It may also have been a product of the study, however, in that it was introduced to them as a research project about why they attend church and what they believe. In an endeavour to demystify the project, the effect may have been a focus on the concrete at the expense of the divine and mysterious.

In order to try and put together the elements of faith and church, the next section asked questions on the role of church in society, although it is impossible to separate this notion from the previous section.

Church and society

There are two aspects to this sub-domain. Firstly the influence church has on society and secondly the influence society is having on the status and position of the church. The fact that the church as a cultural institution has declined is mentioned by one interviewee who has experience of church worship in various international contexts:

Church became a custom for many people and it can still be a very valued one and still be very helpful and useful... that's gone because the culture's changed now. You can't talk about God; therefore all of the helpful hymns and helpful phrases from the Bible are no longer in the English language response. [F6]

The lack of awareness within society of Church, Christianity and beliefs is something which many raised during the interviews. Many people lamented the changes which have taken place in society which have adversely affected church attendance. They see it not so much from the point of view of lack of numbers on pews on Sundays but rather as a symptom of secularisation.

[...] this modern age as I say now, people tend to make Sundays as a day off to go shopping and do things which we wouldn't dare... you wouldn't think of it, you know. [F3]

Well, that's it, I mean, I don't know. Years ago religion was the greatest law that we had. Well now, everything gets done on a Sunday, doesn't it? You know, people don't think, you know. You're an oddity now if you go to church or chapel, whereas before, years ago if you didn't go to church or chapel, well people used to think: 'what's the matter with you?' [F8]

Television was blamed for many of the ills in society, particularly in taking up time and providing alternative entertainment on Sundays (F5, F6, F8, M1). This, together with Sunday opening and greater mobility (F10), was seen as the major factor militating against church attendance and also in influencing society.

On the other hand, the church as an institution was criticised for being too low profile and not taking a stand against things which happen globally:

I wonder why the mess we make of things, the world doesn't get any better. [...] but people never seem to learn. The greed, you know, the wars, the fighting for land, what's it all about? Because they'll all be dead in fifty years, what's the point? [...] The hierarchy in the church are rarely heard. If they made a few more demonstrations, if they really kicked up a bit of a fuss now and then they'd have to be newsworthy, but they let it all happen. [F9]

This person was concerned at the greed in the West which led to exploitation of those in poorer countries and felt that the church should be doing more to support agencies which fight for better conditions for workers in those countries:

We're all prepared to take the cheap products from China. You know, we let other people do our work and pay them a pittance 'oh good, it's cheap'. [F9]

This interviewee was passionate about the international responsibility which the Church had and was distressed that it seemed so powerless or did not take its responsibility seriously enough.

One interviewee suggested that the Church and church attendance were not valued by government and that the social capital offered by the Church was not seen as contributing to society:

I would blame our socialist governments. I'm not too keen on the other lot either. But the socialist people are to my mind very strange in that they cannot see the positive benefits of things like church going, chapel going or they seem not to in the main. They talk to everybody as talking to children and applying a little bit of 'this is what you should do'. [M2]

The corollary of this is that the population tend to follow directives of the state, one of which is not, to attend church. The interviewee continued:

Lazy people take advantage of that. Lazy people are those who can't be bothered to walk to church or chapel or whatever or to be involved. [M2]

Advances in science and the availability of knowledge were seen by one person to contribute to people's questioning faith and, as a result, straying away:

And, um, you know, science has advanced and I think perhaps you know um, people whose faith may be a wee bit, you know, thin perhaps, with certain evidence, you know they feel they don't believe any more. [F7]

A further point of comparison with the Church in Wales was the existence of the chapels; many people pointed out that the church in rural communities is smaller in number because of the chapels to which the Welsh-speaking population would go. This was seen both positively and negatively; positively in that there was diversity in the community which offered potential for collaboration and mutual understanding and support in specific initiatives; negatively from the point of view that numbers were small in both institutions. Only the oldest member of the group suggested exploring joint worship.

There was a sense of helplessness experienced by all of the participants who felt overwhelmed by a society which no longer valued church-going. Most of them mentioned secularisation as responsible for the ills of society and the marginalisation of the church. None of the participants thought that their faith would triumph over the forces of society and they were powerless to stop the tide of corruption which had taken over society. There was little evidence of theological reflection where participants reflected on society through a theological or Christian lens. What became evident, however, was the importance of early introduction to the faith and consequently to the durability of this faith. In terms of moving the church forward, however, there was little evidence that this group of believers felt they had the power to do anything. Nor was there any evidence of the phenomenon of participants, now in the latter part of their lives, feeling that, as long as the church continued to exist while they were alive, that was all they wanted.

The role of the priest/vicar

The role of the clergy is important both from the participants' view of his role within and outside of the church. Questions about the clergy asked them to consider their faith in relation to the vicar; for example they were asked about the extent to which they held the view that the laity had a role to play in the church or whether the role of the vicar/clergy was in some ways more important.

Although the congregations have ownership of the church, demonstrated by their involvement in the services and in extra-Sunday activities, they still regard the vicar as the key person. In many ways, from observation, the vicar is revered by the congregation; he is trusted beyond the trust which would be given to other members of the community. People open up in a way to the vicar which they would not do with others and, as such, they put demands on the vicar which are perhaps not realistic. The following will give an insight into the people's views of the vicar. The letter V is the short-form used for either a specific vicar or vicars in general.

It really does depend on the clergy. You see the V's great because we have Lent and Advent Classes and they're very successful. [F5]

Perhaps I shouldn't say this but I do feel now the Vs don't visit as they used to. Perhaps they are not taught to do this. I don't know really. Because years ago they used to do this regardless of which denomination you were. They reckon that a priest is a parish priest not just...People do like to see a vicar. [F10]

I'll tell you one thing that I think would bring people more back to church, but they don't seem to do it any more, is visiting by the vicar. I've got nothing against V but they don't go visiting any more. Years ago they used to come to the homes and visit you and things but [...] I mean if the vicar visited more people, I'm sure they would have more people to church. [F3]

I don't think that you can make a broad statement like that 'right, if the vicar goes to visit they will come to church'. I've neighbours next door and I've asked them, but they haven't been by. [F7]

[...] like I say V's a good visitor. I mean he goes round and sees everybody. [F1]

My wife has explained that to the vicar and he has appreciated that [M]

The vicar is very good; he does explain things. He's a very clever chap, the vicar is [M1]

[...] unfortunately I feel that... vicars now don't have the time to devote to the parish community, do they? So that's the unfortunate part, see. [F8]

> R: *Do you think vicars have a role in teaching?*
> F8: *Oh...well, I don't know about teaching but um.. perhaps it would be a role in setting an example [...] I mean there was nothing to see the vicar on the door step, you know in the week. Come in specially and they used to walk everywhere then.*
> *[...]*
> R: *so do you think the vicars were more visible in society?*
> F8: *Oh yes they were.*
> R: *Is that important?*
> F8: *Ah well, I think so, yeah...yes. [...] I know we had one vicar and somebody said to him: 'we haven't seen you round for some time' and he said: 'well, I'm in church every Sunday. You can see me there.*

The above quotations reveal that the interviewees see the vicar as fulfilling a multiplicity of roles - confessor, teacher, preacher, theologian, pastoral visitor, representative of God, upholder of Christian values and having many other *ad hoc* roles as their needs and the needs of the church at various time dictate – chairman, intermediary, DIY expert, accountant, negotiator and general *factotum*.

The criticisms levelled at vicars for not visiting were not directed at the vicars of the churches involved in this study but rather of vicars and priests in general. When asked about this, the vicars answered that, with several churches to pastor, and with the visits which had to be made, for example to the housebound and the sick both at home and in hospital, there was just not the time available to embark on a programme of house visits. In comparison to this view one rector of an urban congregation said that: *people wouldn't know what to do with me if I turned up on their doorsteps* and commented further that this was very much a rural habit and expectation and that

priests in urban settings would not expected to embark on a regular parish visitation. It is interesting to note the connection made by at least one participant who stated that the result of the vicars' visits might be an increase in the church population; there still seemed to be the impression that, despite recognition of the role of the laity in bringing people to church, the vicar had more authority, as illustrated by the rather short retort of the vicar mentioned in the final example.

Discussion of Research Question 1

The section dealing with faith was rather weak in relation to the other topics of the interview. Partly this was due to the fact that the interviewer felt that the participants were struggling with the material and in trying to express themselves but this was, in retrospect, a flaw in the conduct of the interview. In the pilot interview, when asked about the Apostles' Creed and which aspects the participant believed in, the respondent said she believed everything. This resulted in the interviewer abandoning that part of the interview schedule and omitting much of this from subsequent interviews. In retrospect this was a mistake as evidenced by the work of Christie (2005) and Astley and Christie (2007). In their interviews which asked participants about their beliefs in the deity of Christ, they found that whilst interviewees declared their belief in everything in the *Nicene Creed*, subsequent questioning revealed this not to be the case. Whereas the *Nicene Creed* declares the divinity of Christ, many of these participants said that Jesus could not be God. There was therefore either a misunderstanding or lack of knowledge of the theology the *Nicene Creed* contained or there was no consistency between the fragments of their beliefs. The more in-depth work on one or two aspects of theology may have yielded different results.

As a point of comparison, the work of Peddle (2008) encountered similar difficulties; in not tackling some of the major issues of faith but focusing on the social aspects of people's experience of church, he found that he missed some of the more challenging possibilities to responses. This must be borne in mind when considering the final research question, namely the extent to which the evidence presented by these participants constitutes an ordinary theology.

Most interviewees felt comfortable when they talked about the concrete aspects of their belief. This recalls the experience of Astley, outlined in chapter 3 (page 65) when he interviewed students of theology and encouraged them to think outside of the rigidly defined categories, the students were able to discuss concrete aspects of their faith much more easily than the abstract concepts.

In answering the question as to what the participants believe, it could be concluded that their theology does not amount to a systematic theology which one would recognise from any theological textbook. It was evident from many of the interviews, however, that the church was fundamental to their life. What was not portrayed in the interview transcripts was the facial expressions and intonation of many of the interviewees, who, when telling of their experiences of church, were transported from the interview room to a place in their lives which represented church. One participant brought to the interview a photograph album spanning many years of one of the project churches and the church to which she previously belonged which had merged with the said church. In discussing the churches and her role in them, she relived the past and became very nostalgic.

It was clear that for all of the interviewees, either explicitly or implicitly, that church represented both the building which sits at the centre of the community and the community of believers. It echoes the words of Hauerwas (1996: 95) who claims that the church does not have a social ethic but *is* a social ethic in that it is a community which is distinguished from the world.

The participants in this study saw their task as two-fold; firstly to be faithful to their calling in supporting each other and, secondly, to demonstrate their faith by their works in the community. For many of them, this meant being themselves and doing what was required, with honesty, willingness and selflessness; in so doing they felt they were acting in accordance with their Christian faith. In this way they would be illustrating the point made in the book of James where the writer notes the necessity of work to demonstrate faith. Hauerwas views the church as a community which is in sharp contrast to the world because it *takes as its constitution a story whose truth creates a people who love honestly, because they have the confidence that such love binds our lives to God's very character* (1996: 98).

In some sense many of the interviews tended to revolve around church, either as a building, an institution or a significant influence in the life of the interviewees; in some interviews they did not get beyond this. Partly this was the fault of the interviewer who, when the interview seemed to falter, would return to an aspect of their theology or faith which was concrete, and more often than not the questioning returned to the church. In many ways the theology espoused by these participants centred on the church in its various forms and every question bore some relation to church and to the concrete. In this respect, therefore, if we look at Fowler's taxonomy

of faith, it would be necessary to locate the faith of many of these believers at the lower end at the concrete operational stage, to use Piaget's developmental term, although again it may be that they were not sufficiently 'pushed' during the course of the interviews.

In measuring the responses against the dichotomy set out by Davie (1994), believing and belonging, most of the participants here would have provided evidence which suggests that the belonging preceded the believing, or, more accurately perhaps that they were more confident about talking about the belonging aspect than they were in expressing their beliefs. It could be the case, however, in retrospect, that the questions were designed more to facilitate description of their belonging than their believing or, indeed, that it is easier to access a language of belonging than it is to grapple with believing. Nevertheless there was a very strong link between their belonging to the church and believing which went beyond simply having social gatherings or a sense of community in church. The findings would also present evidence of Walker's (2006) insistence of the importance of belonging in the rural community and the notion of the church as sacred space.

The data from this research question would also suggest that the distinction made by Francis and Robbins (2004) between belonging and practising seems to have some validity. The participants in this study would claim to be doing all three – belonging to the church as their identity, believing and practising the faith in both the formal and informal environments.

The converse problem exists, according to Davie (2004) in Northern Europe where people tend to belong to the state church without necessary believing. Within parts of the UK, such as Northern Ireland this also was a trend until relatively recently, where church attendance was regarded as part of social identity. It seems also to be a feature in the work of Peddle (2008).

Cruchley-Jones' (2001) project presents an interesting comparison to the findings of this study, based, as it was, in a deprived area of Cardiff in South Wales. He concludes that the current situation in the church is similar to that of the exile. He uses the term post-Church society in preference to secular society since he considers the former to acknowledge the fact that religion continues to have a role in contemporary society. The participants in his study experienced a sense of marginalisation which Cruchley-Jones sub-divides into four: loss of pre-eminence, relativisation through pluralism, captivity to individualism and numerical decline. Many of these themes emerge in the responses by the participants in this study. They sense the loss of status which used to be afforded to church and vicar in society. They note the numerical decline but relate this to the fault of society. Cruchley-Jones (2001: 104) finds that much of the 'God-talk' in the liturgy, hymns and ecclesiology is now anachronistic, belonging to an area in which the church was more prominent both culturally and politically. He states that although contemporary culture may be inimical to the church, it may not be inimical to the Gospel, and indeed the church can be inimical to the Gospel. This would confirm the views held by the participants in this rural Wales study who appear all too aware of the anachronistic nature of the Church in the face of the changing nature of society but they are unaware of how the

church might address the problem or that the church should be adapting to accommodate a changing society.

According to Cruchley-Jones' (2001) analysis of beliefs, people pick and choose what to believe, whether it accords with the orthodoxy of the church. Elements of this can be found also in Davie's believing but not belonging.

The findings on church can also be compared with the study conducted by Peddle (2008). Peddle attributed the stability in terms of numbers in churches in Newfoundland and Labrador to a strong sense of community. Focusing on social capital theory, Peddle comments that there was evidence of bonding capital which enriched the coherence and cohesion of the church as a community. The clear difference between that study and this was the fact that the churches in Newfoundland were much stronger in terms of numbers than the ones in this study. A detailed explanation of the social and cultural differences between the two contexts is beyond the scope of this study, but Peddle highlights the balance which is necessary between bonding and bridging capital, the latter being required for reaching out to the other groups in the community. Whilst there was little evidence in the Welsh study that the bonding was so strong that it militated against bridging, the bonding element was seen as a necessary element in sustaining the existing fellowships.

Another point of comparison can be made with the Newfoundland study. Peddle (2008) found that the people in his study demonstrated ownership of the church, including the value they placed on the building but also the strong emotional bonds they felt with the community. Whilst the current study also produced evidence of

ownership, illustrated by the selfless involvement of many of those interviewed in maintaining the building and contributing to worship, this did not extend to vibrant numbers on church rolls and, more importantly, in Sunday attendance. One example of a church closing and the community coming out in support of it at its final service of worship gave some support to the notion that the church, as an institution or as a building at least, is valued highly by the rural community, but not to the extent that they feel ownership of the theology and practices, resulting in attendance.

It was seen from the interviews that the role of the vicar is central in the perception of the parishioners both to the sustaining of the community, in providing a focus in wider society and key to the mission of the church. The view that the vicar must visit more is one which is mentioned also by the respondents in Peddle's (2008) study in Newfoundland which is also a rural context. Peddle remarked that the people in society repaid their loyalty to a visiting vicar by attending worship in church and by contributing to the work of the church. The participants in the present study seemed to suggest that poor attendance and participation in worship were the result of lack of visiting and that a higher profile vicar in society would result in a higher profile of the church. These views have to be situated in the context of the wider changes in society and might be located in secularisation theory which is more prominent in the current Welsh context than may be the case in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Religion is really for the clergy (Astley and Christie, 2007, 3) was a quotation from a participant in the study looking at ordinary people's views of theology in the North East of England. The people in this study did not voice this opinion; it was clear from many statements and views that there was no contradiction between what might be

called 'organised' religion and their own faith. This may have been because of the importance attached to lay ministry in one of the churches where the vicar is viewed as part of a team, albeit it in a leadership role. They did view the role of the vicar as distinct, however, and regarded him as having responsibility for the organised aspects of the service and also for representing religion in the community. This came out very strongly in the section which asked for their views of the vicar.

The importance of the story in creating community is highlighted by Frost (2000: 100) who looks at Hauerwas' model of church as a *story-formed community*. What this study has attempted to do is to unlock chapters of this story which makes up the rural church in Mid-Wales, albeit in a small way. The story is linked to their lives and is informed by their experiences in church, at worship and in society in general. It is impossible to separate the theological from the ordinary, and in doing so we have, according to Frost (2000: 11) *flattened out the truth of the gospel*. According to Frost there is a richness in the experiences of our lives which by ignoring their significance theologically we compartmentalise our lives and do not integrate the sacred with the ordinary, unlike Jesus who made no such distinction.

Although many of the participants in the interviews struggled to articulate what appeared to be strongly held beliefs, the evidence was of a deep theology which has lain unexplored, in many cases since childhood. The study of Peddle (2008) found that the church in that area was built around the ordinary people's theology. He goes so far as to say that the theology of the people is the theology of the church, that the ordinary theology in that region is rich, deep and goes back a long way. As this study was not completed at the time of this writing phase, it is not possible to explore this

further. There did not appear to be any dissonance between the theology of the people in this Welsh study and the theology held by the church, as evidenced by the observation and the views of the two priests. What appears to be missing in this context is that the theology of the church is not so attractive to the wider rural community who do not attend and that the number of people who find their beliefs supported by the church is dwindling as opposed to thriving, as appears to be the case in the rural Canadian context.

The sentiments expressed by the participants in relation to secularisation are interesting in that they refer to what Lyon (1985) refers to as 'social citadels of hope' (cited in Cruchley-Jones, 2001: 59). These social constructions such as Sunday shopping, entertainment and leisure are viewed as activities with which the church has to compete on a Sunday. Cruchley-Jones comments that although these things contribute to church decline, they do not, in fact, cause it; the second statement Cruchley-Jones makes is that *they locate the blame for this outside the church* (*ibid.*). There are two responses to this, according to him; either the church is portrayed as a victim of this change or that the church should make changes to style of worship to attract others back into church. Both these views appear in the responses of the interviewees in this study. Cruchley-Jones argues that serious consideration should be given to the underlying causes of church decline and to what church ought to be like in such circumstances.

In commenting on the role of the rural community church in encouraging greater community involvement in church, the work of Francis and Littler (2003) is relevant. They found that people who do not attend church generally do not have any specific

reason for not going. Many have been put off by the hierarchy or leadership of the church. This is consistent with their previous findings and Francis and Littler conclude that the rural church need not feel responsible for this falling away. They found no gender difference in that both men and women are likely to feel alienated and no age difference; under and over-50s alike tend to feel alienated. Surprisingly they found that of the respondents to the questionnaire, many would consider returning to church if certain changes were made, specifically in relation to making them feel more welcome. This is surprising because since most of these respondents appear not to have been to church, it is difficult to understand how they are in a position to measure the level of welcome they would receive. Other factors which would encourage attendance at church were: an emphasis on traditional hymns with familiar tunes, a service which is easier to follow, using the traditional prayer book, more relevant sermons and a quieter more meditative atmosphere in church. Francis and Littler (2003) also found that established residents of a community were more likely to consider returning to church than new residents to an area. The authors are realistic in their assessment of the findings and point out that too much generalisation cannot be made of the findings of a small-scale study conducted in one rural parish. They advise, however, that they give some pointers to those interested in trying to meet the needs of those in rural communities.

Research Question 2 - How do these churchgoers express their theology

There are two elements to this question. The first refers to the way in which the participants' beliefs find expression in their practices, both of church attendance and

how they live their lives in general. A second element to the question, however, relates to the language used by participants to express their beliefs.

Church attendance

The main form of expressing their faith in practice for all participants was church attendance; for many their faith preceded their attendance at church and for those who had grown up in church, their faith grew with them. All of the participants were able to tell of their journey which took them to their current church. Some respondents had been in the church all their lives and lived in their current home for most of their life. As such the insight gained of change in the rural community from such interviewees was enlightening. Other respondents had moved to the area or had moved consciously to their current church because of a variety of factors. The profiles of each of the participants presented on the following page situate their church attendance in context.

The fact that all of the interviewees had some background in the church, in every case with some foundations set by parents or grandparents in their early years is illustrative of the age range of the participants (all over 50). Of those who mentioned that they had come later in life to participation in the church, four (F2, F5, M1, M2) indicated that they had exposure to church in their early years. Only one of the participants (M3) who had come later in life into church involvement did not mention early childhood experience.

Table 4.1 – Details of church attendance record

Interviewee	Attending since...	Other remarks
F1	All her life	Moved to this area 9 years ago. Started attending Welsh chapel. Has been in church B for 5 years
F2	4.5 years	Started as toddler, fell away from faith. Returned after husband died.
F3	All her life	Started in Sunday school aged 5 or 6
F4	All her life	From Sunday school. Found this church shortly after coming to the local area.
F5	17 years ago	Started as a child but left. Returned since her husband died.
F6	Since Baptism	Grandparents sent her to Sunday school: *Everything figured to me from Sunday school[...]* I'd always known God
F7	Since Baptism	Originally from Baptist family. Attended this church (A) on moving to the area.
F8	All her life	Started in this church; was moved to other church nearby by the vicar. It closed and she returned to this church.
F9	Since Sunday school	Moved back to this area some years ago; sporadic attendance at church during years with young family
F10	All her life	Attended church B since marriage 43 years ago.
M1	Since child; brought up by grandmother	Originally attended Welsh chapel and then moved to church B because it was closer. Had time away from church following family bereavement. Returned some years ago.
M2	Attended Sunday school	Away for 4 or 5 years. Later attendance at Evensong during University years. Came to this church over 15 years ago with wife.
M3	20 years ago	Came to church because of his daughter who attended.

Many of the interviewees started attending their current place of worship because of the involvement of others which was seen as an important 'ministry' by many of them. Examples of the journeys of some are represented below:

And so I said to her once, um, we'd been to some particular function and I said to her 'do you think I could come with you on Sunday?' and she said, it was something special, and she said 'certainly.' So we went and then she said 'if you want to come more often you can do,' so I said 'well I'd like to come every week,' [F1]

So I called one day and it was M and Mrs P. And, they said to me, M said: Come back to church. Well, I want to come back, M, I said, I want to come back, I said and I did go back and I met her there and, of course, she was the warden and she said 'I hope it is not just for the one day'. 'Oh, no, M,' I said, 'I'm back altogether now', I said [M1]

So, firstly she convinced me that I should do [go to church] and uh it would be helpful to her and uh to lift the numbers a little bit. And she asked me questions and I told her I I (laughs) had to be aware of not converting her to my way of thinking (laughs) I said 'there are things in my mind that aren't quite right. The mystery is there uh I accept that uh, but why aren't animals included? [...] I found her friendly, helpful and so forth and uh so I started going to church [M2]

The pattern of church attendance had decreased for most of the interviewees, many of them having attended two or three times every Sunday in their young days. The pattern for some had changed as their live circumstances had changed.

Involvement in church activities

The question about church attendance was followed by questions relating to their involvement in church life, both in the current church but also their contribution in the past or to other churches they had attended previously. This gave them the opportunity to talk about practical application of their faith in the church context. Four of them had been wardens at one stage in their lives, two were current wardens (F2, F3, M1, F8). Some indicated that they did anything that required help (F1, F4, M3), two mentioned practical help (M1, M2) and some talked about participation in particular groups (F4, M3, F5), including bereavement groups, a lunch club in

conjunction with other churches (F4, F5) and some had been Sunday school teachers (F3, F7). One woman is currently organist (F6). There may be a correlation between involvement in church activities and involvement in this project so that those being interviewed are the ones most likely to volunteer for anything to do with church. Clearly they found expression of their faith in their involvement in church activities and they felt that it was a natural way of contributing to the work of the church.

Sacraments and confirmation

Fundamental to the practice of their beliefs was the evidence they presented relating to what the Sacraments and liturgy meant for them. These elements were seen very much as expressions of their theology, although, again, many had difficulty finding the words to express themselves with confidence.

- Baptism

As the first step for most of the participants on their journey of faith, this Sacrament will be dealt with first. All except one of those interviewed had been baptised as infants; the one person (F7) had been baptised as an adult. In discussing baptism, most of them saw this as an initiation into the church community and they regarded it as an important landmark in their being brought into the institution as well as into the faith community: *Well, an acceptance, an entrance, a welcome baptism, a welcome of the child into the church* (F5). One woman (F3) noted that it was a Covenant between the parents and God but she was concerned that many parents nowadays do not keep the promise to look after the children and bring them up in the faith. She thought that the problem with this lay in the fact that many parents now regarded baptism simply as the 'done thing' since they themselves had been baptised that it was

the next step in the rituals of life. One man thought that it was preferable that the children be baptised by parents and: *then they can go their own way then, like if you know* [M3]. Another woman stated:

Bringing a baby to be a member of the church and being welcomed in by the congregation, and hopefully being the start of bringing up that little child to understand about religion in a child-like way as they go through the childhood years so it will mean something to them for life. [F9]

They were asked to focus specifically on what their Baptism, in retrospect looking over their Christian life, meant for them. One participant was able to identify her Baptism as a spiritual awakening:

I value my own [Baptism] very very highly. I was obviously sprinkled as a child because it was a social thing but I've always realised how valuable that was because I do remember before I learned to speak I was aware that speech was communication between adult and the baby and [they would] say: 'there's a nice little baby, goo, goo, ga' and I'd think: 'what on earth are they talking to me like that for?' You know, the equivalent without words and only later as I was older I realised what this feeling was and I though 'I don't like that feeling' and I thought 'I am so glad I was baptised' (laughs) because that perhaps gave me the spiritual strength to recognise it for what it was and to say 'no' to it. When I'm a newcomer in a church I very often sit by the font. [F6]

It was stressed by many of the interviewees that the child was welcomed into the Universal Church and that it was not simply a membership of one church club, as evidenced by one anecdote where a vicar had declared at a baptism that the child was *'now a member of our church, our parish'* and the congregation was rather perplexed at this statement. This participant lamented the fact:

[there are] in fact in quite a number of places ministers who baptise and confirm within their own community only and even another Christian is not accepted and that has happened to me; very painful but it's what has happened. [F6]

The question as to whether children, whose parents do not share a Christian faith, received a mixed reception. An incident was related at length by one interviewee who had experience in a former setting of a vicar who had refused to baptise the child of parents who did not attend church. This woman's view was that it was not the child's fault and that every child had the right to be baptised, as evidenced in the following outburst:

[the vicar said]: 'you don't attend my chapel and I'm not having this wheels service where you come in to be christened, to be married and to be buried'. So he said 'the answer is most definitely 'no'. [...] I said: 'I think it is the most un-Christian act I have ever heard of in my life. [...] I feel so strongly about it that I think it's disgraceful for any minister to refuse to baptise a baby. What about 'suffer the little children'? [F1]

This participant raised the fear that children who were not baptised as babies were lost if they died, a view shared with another interviewee:

I mean you've got to be baptised to enter heaven, so what happens to them if they die between them being born and being baptised later on? Where do they go? [F1]

I've got this funny feeling that... if a child isn't baptised I just feel they are in limbo. I just feel they are little lost souls. I know that the ...don't the Roman Catholics believe that? [F2]

Although it was acknowledged by the group that baptism was extremely important for them in their Christian lives, they considered it important as a ritual for all children, regardless of the faith or faithfulness of the parents. They viewed it as a start of a journey and that it was then the responsibility of the parents and the child itself when it grew up as to the outworking of the baptism. All participants maintained that perseverance in the faith was necessary; there was no feeling that baptism in and of itself was a guarantee of salvation, with the exception of the points raised above about

infant mortality. Parents in this study whose children had been baptised but who had not continued in the faith, were quite rational about it and they felt that they had done all they could and that it is up to the children themselves now and with their own families. Those of the group who themselves had strayed from the church after baptism or confirmation presented themselves as evidence that God was still working in their lives during their wilderness years and that He had brought them back in His timing. They remained hopeful that their children and grandchildren would return in the future.

Confirmation was seen as the acceptance of the individual of the vows declared by their parents at birth. One person summarised the process thus:

It's something that's immensely important to me that I was baptised. So when I was confirmed I was fully consenting. I wanted to consent and say: 'yes, I agree wholly with what was done on my behalf and I now take responsibility for that.' It was important for me. [...] it was made clear to us that confirmation meant you accepted Christ on your own behalf and your own responsibility and you were a member of The Church. [F6]

Three of the interviewees were convinced that the timing of the confirmation was rather too early and that the young people at 12 or 13 had not sufficient maturity to accept the responsibility at that age. There was also the recognition that peer pressure now is influencing some who are now not proceeding to confirmation because it is not 'cool' with their friends. One person commented on the importance of the Sunday school as a bridge between Baptism and confirmation and that if children stop attending Sunday school they are less likely to come back for Confirmation. The one person who herself had been baptised as an adult still valued the importance of infant Baptism and had her own family baptised as babies; she strongly emphasised the

importance of the Confirmation as just that – a confirmation by the children that they were now accepting for themselves their Baptism.

- Eucharist

The Sacrament of Holy Communion or Eucharist was for many people the highlight of their formal worship in church. Although not many were able to articulate what they thought happened in the Eucharist, they all, with only one exception, had positive experiences to relate, memories, feelings and impressions, some of which were difficult to express in words. The following examples of quotations or excerpts illustrate the experiences of the various interviewees:

Well, it's just something that I like to do and I, and I think it makes you feel better. And you sort of concentrate more on things don't you, when you go to communion. [F1]

When my father died because then there was a relative in the family who is a vicar and he came to give us the Eucharist at home and it was just such a special occasion and I just felt that...I can't really describe what happened but I was aware that there was something, a presence there, whilst that was going on. And um, strangely enough my brother and my mother felt the same although we didn't discuss it at the time, it was something that came out later and I think that that had a big impact. [...] Well it's not just a thing of going in and having a sip of wine and a wafer, you know, it's the meaning behind it and how it affects you. [F2]

You feel close to God when you're having communion, don't you? You've got the bread and the wine, and uh, don't you... you know when I'm having communion, I just pray there again for all my friends and my family and things, you know, there.[...] When I go up for communion I feel, I feel part, you know, more part of the church, yeah. [F3]

Nobody knows how I feel when I go to that rail. I feel so 'umble, you know. [...] I just, sometimes I feel I could weep, you know, I feel so humble when I've communion. I know it's wrong but I do think 'do I really deserve it?' When he always says to the congregation...um 'we'll 'ave a quiet time to, for you to pour your sins out,' I think: 'oh, dear me, you know?' [...] But when I come away from the rail I feel a different person, you know. It probably wears off again and afterwards, but at that moment in time, it's just, I don't know why, but summit does come over me. [F4]

And then you see the difference when you've been, you know what I mean? [M3]

Yes, yes, I <u>love</u> the Communion service... I really do, um, I enjoy all the services but that's my favourite and I would hate to miss it. [...] You feel you are privileged and you wish that everybody would feel the same way or get the same feeling of comfort. [F5]

High spot, yeah. It's the one that I really want (laughs) and if I'm deprived of it, it hurts. I just feel so hungry. [...] Yes, I mean this isn't a theology or a Christian duty for me if... it's an invitation. I'm saying yes. [F6]

I did ask Jesus a lot about..um.. and I said: 'well, what is this about? Some say you're really present in the Communion, some say you're not, well, I feel you're there but I can't decide that; that's bigger than my brain. If I need to know, you just let me know'. [...] then one day I went into communion and Jesus was suddenly there in front of me and I came alive because I didn't expect to see Jesus [...] and I could smell him; a clean washed young man. [F6]

What are we, eight on the communion rail? To me it's just me alone at that table... and you get that...I don't know, it gives you that peace and satisfaction and you think 'well...this is the climax and the sort of icing on the cake where your faith and your religion is..takes place. [F8]

> M2: *I just accept that it's the right thing to do, yeah. I don't think 'shall I, shan't I? No, I once had a cold and I didn't want to go to the communion rail, so I didn't uh, but, whether people noticed or not I don't know.*
> R: *Do you feel different after participating in any way?*
> M2: *No, no. Well, I don't go there with a big problem. Not so far.*

The communion in the chapel is not like the communion in the church. You sit in a pew in the chapel and in the church you go up to Jesus to the table; you have food here you get people to the table. They come to you to the table, don't they? There's a Sacrament. You come up to God to have your... and that's what I say for the chapel. I don't see that happening. It is very negative in the chapel. Yes.. [M1]

The views above and the way these views are expressed give a fascinating insight into how the interviewees approach the Eucharist, what their feelings are and, in some cases, what changes they experienced as a result of the process. They have allowed the participants to speak about something about which they are in most cases speaking about for the first time. The print and the transcription do not give the insight into the paralinguistic information available to the interviewer. In many cases they were transported, their intonation changed, the pace of delivery slowed, they looked up and beyond the interviewer and the immediate surroundings to a place familiar to them

and seemed to be participating in and re-living the event. Each response was individual; there was no hint of them trying to say what the researcher wanted to hear. This was real to them and experienced, in most cases, at a very deep level which was beyond expression. The number of hesitations and redundant tags above give some indication of the difficulty they were having trying to find words to express this most intimate of experiences. In most of the cases there was truly a communion with the divine and they expressed this in different ways – from a feeling a lightness, an inner joy, peace or comfort or a more uncomfortable feeling of unworthiness before and relief thereafter. Truly this was a highlight of their Christian worship and a highlight in most of the interviews. In summary the Eucharist is the pinnacle of Anglican worship was clearly affirmed by the interviewees here; it was the hub of their faith and practices.

Liturgy and worship

This section is closely related to the previous one since the Sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, are integral to worship. In this sub-section both practices as part of community and in private are explored. As a starting point for the liturgical aspect of worship, the concrete topic of the prayer book was introduced. The responses to this varied from comfort with the familiar to resistance to the changes to these books introduced to the Church in Wales in 2004. In some cases it was difficult to get the participants to see beyond these changes which had caused them some difficulty. Some people voiced concern that the nature of the *Prayer Book* could result in automatic regurgitation and recitation rather than thinking about and meaning what is being read aloud; one person suggested not reading aloud and letting the words become more meaningful:

No, I like the Anglican worship. You can... what I like about.. although I know the service, sometimes I just look at the book and I just read, I don't say it, I just read it and you can... really feel that you can read it and really think what it's... what you are reading about. Because it's so automatic you don't really think what you are saying. [F7]

The above sections have focused primarily on the corporate aspects of worship, concentrating on what happens in the church. Questions were also asked about how these practices had an impact on their everyday lives and the extent to which prayer, Bible study, hymns and sermons played a role in their general day to day existence. Some questions linked both, for example, asking about sermons which were memorable, and the qualities of a memorable sermon led to an exploration of how the sermons influenced their living as a Christian.

- Prayer

Prayer both private and corporate was explored. All of the participants had some pattern of prayer, although some felt guilty that they were not praying as often as they should. The routines established in childhood for some people remained, for example praying in the morning and praying in the evening before going to bed, or in bed. One person referred to prayer as her *private chatter to Jesus* (F6) and one woman tended to have more *God-bothers* (F4) in prayer. The posture of prayer tends to be more flexible:

As children we used to kneel down at the bedside and do this every night. Um, but now, no I mean, I don't actually, apart from when I am in church I don't kneel down. [...] I mean you might think I'm mad but I sort of walk around and talking to God in the day. [F2]

Oh, I pray a lot (laughs). I pray when I'm walking down the road, everywhere, you know, especially with and for m eyesight as well you know, because now I'm registered blind. [...] I just say thank God for the sight I've got and hope I can keep

the sight I've got. I'm forever praying and talking to God. [...] Yes, it's like He's a friend to me. [-]

I walk a lot and I find myself, I do, I find myself talking to God when I'm out in the hills. As you say I think we are fortunate in a rural community because [...] I can see God in the hills. I see Him I was walking along the prom and you know. [F7]

One person noted the times when prayer can be difficult:

Well it depends, doesn't it? Sometimes I can pray and it doesn't, and it's dead easy and other times you can pray and your mind's wandering all over the place. [F1]

There was also the location to which the prayer was directed:

And it's conversation that's internal. [...] Jesus is inside you; it's no good trying to do it outside and focus it out, it won't focus. He's in you. [F6]

When asked about answered prayer, people tended to focus more on the strength they

obtained by the process rather than any identifiable outcome:

I mean, especially when [husband] was dying I got strength. And probably since then, because I have got to carry on. [-]

F9: *Prayer and thinking is very personal to me...often thinking about things is a sort of prayer when you're looking for some sort of help or guidance.[...] Yeah or driving the car along when it's sort of cos prayer...yes, it is just something that can only last maybe a minute or two...that's my sort of prayer.*
R: *Can you think of any time when you've had specific answers to things you've been praying about?*
F9: *Strength more than answers. Yes, strength when something's not easy, it gives you strength to do it and you think: 'I can do this'.*

In addition to praying for strength, people noted intercessory prayer where they

prayed for their friends and neighbours and prayers of confession where they asked

forgiveness for specific things they had done, notably, in one case, selfishness.

Only one person had experience of praying formally *for* people in the context of a prayer ministry team, but her view of this was that she simply had to be available and that it was not the praying *per se* but rather her availability:

Prayer ministry, yes, and so I was forcibly jointed in and I couldn't pray great prayers and all the la de da. I was just standing there thinking: 'I can't do this sort of thing, Jesus. I can't do anything at all. I can just stand here'. There was the person being prayed for and there was Jesus and I was kind of in between the two and there was this strong calm sense of 'that's all you need to do, dearie. Just stand there' And it went through me as it were and I thought: 'oh, how marvellous, how easy. Is that what prayer is? It's so easy. Just love Jesus and stand beside Him and he does it through you. [F6]

The impression was gained from the discussion on prayer that all of the interviewees regarded prayer as integral to their faith. Their view was of a God who was a friend, approachable, with whom they communicate, despite the fact that few could point directly to answers they had received in response to prayer. They certainly felt benefit from prayer and they did not approach it either as a ritual or a duty; it was something that came naturally to them, particularly the spontaneous, conversational style prayer which many of them adopted. With the one exception above in the prayer ministry example, there was a lack of expectation that anything would result from prayer except the strength to go on. No-one seemed to pray for divine intervention or for a miracle, but they all had a deep sense of being in touch with God.

● Bible

Questions were asked about their routine in Bible reading – whether they read it at all, why, what they gained from it and any passages which were especially meaningful to them and how it affected their lives.

Three people answered that they did not read it as often as they ought, although no-one was sure what would be regarded as an acceptable amount of time spent in Bible

study. Some used daily reading notes to accompany their reading, others joined the church Bible study groups or equivalent (Lent, Advent, once a month group), particularly in order to get some insights from the others in the group. One person said that parts of the Bible were *mumbo jumbo* to her and that she benefited from the corporate study of the Bible to help her understand.

One woman had spent a considerable amount of time grappling with the texts and trying to find reasons behind them, for example the fact that Moses was not allowed to see the Promised Land, that John the Baptist is regarded as least in the Kingdom of God and that the woman in adultery was singled out and the man involved was not mentioned.

In terms of texts or parts of the Bible which were particularly meaningful for the interviewees, the parables were mentioned several times, in particular the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, and the Psalms. One person noted the relevance of some of the Psalms to the rural setting in which she lives:

Yes, Psalm 121 'I will lift up mine eyes to the hills. From whence comes my help? (laughs) [...] Yeah, every morning when I draw the curtains and the sky is lovely and blue and it looks absolutely gorgeous and I think of it. And Psalm 16 I like as well [...] 'a fair land is my possession' and I always think, well that's very apt because a fair land is my possession living here. [F1]

An important question which was omitted but which would have been enlightening for this particular part of the discussion was the individuals' view of the Bible; whether they regarded it as the inspired Word of God, a good book or a religious text like any others. This was an omission but their responses seemed to indicate that they

regarded it highly, that they ought to be reading it more and that it had some relevance for their everyday lives.

One individual who had experience of *lectio divina* which, according to Sheldrake (2007: 96) is related to patristic and monastic tradition of biblical exegesis, but one where *understanding, desire and transformation are interwoven*. This woman describes it thus:

Well, it's wonderful. It's chewing. [...] It's done as a part of prayer and ends in prayer. [...] It was just Carmelites together to think over the spirituality and to do, let you be in it together which we found enormously helpful. The insights you get from somebody else's soul as they read it. [...] the first time there's a silent reading and the second time you can say anyone's sentences that really pings in your own soul. It goes in very deep and it's based absolutely on Scripture [...] and I've found that more helpful than any other form of Bible reading. [F6]

In many ways it is quite difficult to disentangle these two research questions, that is to say to separate what the people believe from how they express these beliefs.

The second way of interpreting the second research question relating to how people express their theology is connected with language. Although it is a topic in its own right and merits much more detailed analysis, it will be touched on in this section for the purposes of illustration. In this section some examples of the type of language used by them to express different concepts and experiences is presented.

A major consideration within the rural context in Mid-Wales is the place of the Welsh language in worship. All three churches operate a policy of bilingualism in worship and the services. The priests in these churches are native English speakers but have learnt Welsh proficiently. It was to be expected that the native Welsh speakers would

have preferred more Welsh, but this was not the case as illustrated by the following accounts:

But um...it's very difficult...(sighs). Although we are in a Welsh parish there are so many English people in the church and they're so hard-working that I feel sometimes maybe it would be better... but there again the Welsh people would go against that.[...] We as Welsh people understand English but the English people don't understand Welsh, not a lot anyway. [F8]

I'm all for bilingual. The only thing I've got agin it. When I was a youngster it was English in the morning and Welsh at night; you would have a sermon and it would be all English or all Welsh. Now we've got a sermon which is both languages. You cut down to half. You don't get the full amount.. [M1]

Well I find it much better now because as you know we've got English people coming. But em.. there was a time when there was a bit of controversy, because they though there was too much English but now they have changed and it is half and half every Sunday and I feel it is much better for everybody all round. [...] so you see it is a bilingual one each Sunday. [F10]

Most English members of the group also were happy with the bilingual approach, although most of them made an effort in the liturgy when it was the Welsh version:

Yeah I get on fine with [the bilingual approach]. Because it's their country. We're the visitors; that's the way we look at it. [...] and 'e does it 'alf and 'alf. [F4]

If it had been more Welsh we would have just drifted away. [M3]

It's worth learning [Welsh] a bit. [...] I don't know much, I did start learning but I can pronounce it all, I can. I can reel the liturgy off, yes. [F5]

There are dangers in having bilingual for the English speaker. The dangers are that if you have a resonant church building and if you're getting old so you don't hear quite as well as you used to [...] and then you come to a section which is in a language you don't understand, it's more difficult to follow. [M2]

One example of views of God/Jesus in the context of use of language and faith is the use of prepositions. The use of prepositions reveals how they understand their relationship with the Divine. The example quoted above illustrates the Divine inside:

*The Holy Spirit came deep **inside** me. And he went down so deep that I didn't know I went that deep* [F6]

*One day I went into communion and Jesus was suddenly there **in front of** me and I came alive because I didn't expect to see Jesus [...] and I could smell him; a clean washed young man.* [F6]

*Jesus is **inside** you, it's no good trying to do it outside and focus it out, it won't focus. [...] There was one point I was confessing to God something I'd done rather mean and wasn't very nice and asked forgiveness and it was as if Jesus came out of me and stood **in front of** me and just loved me and vanished again and I thought.. 'well of course I can't see you'. He's normally **inside** of me... 'how on earth can I expect to see you in front of me?'* [F6]

This interviewee expressed herself throughout the interview very visually and in a way which illustrated the dynamic of relationship – at one time within, at others outside of her, talking with her in a personal way, giving instructions, being obeyed.

This experience was also expressed by others who used prepositions to describe what they meant:

*[God] is there behind you, sitting **beside** me.* [F5]

*He's sort of all **around** you.* [F7]

*[...] the way I see God it's like having somebody standing **behind** me that you can't see [...] I have a vision of him as a strength **behind** me.* [F9]

The interviewees expressed their theology in terms relational to themselves; they needed to know that God was not somewhere remote but could be accessed and who was omnipresent rather than absent.

In some of the interviews, there were what can only be described as poetic narratives, parts which were more elaborate than required to answer the question but which gave an insight into how the person viewed their faith and their Christian experience. There were several passages containing simile or metaphor which are worth quoting in full to give a flavour of them:

Yes, I mean, well you will think I'm a little bit silly but we have land behind our house and then you go down a steep dingle to a brook at the bottom, that's our boundary. Now there is a stream down at the bottom there, then there is a little meadow across there, could be about 12, 14 yards wide and the steep bank at the other side up to the other farm. That has all been planted years ago and I on many occasion, I go around these fields for a walk, I stop and look down the dingle but there is one place there in the Autumn, Peter, it's absolutely beautiful. You look to the other side and see those Japanese arches turning colour, going orange, brownish yellow, all these colours... beautiful. And on our side it's wild shrubs that are growing there and there's a crab apple tree down there about 12 yards away there is a black thorn with sloes on it. There's this black thorn, the sloes, the crab apple tree here and in the middle, dominating the lot, straight up to the sky, this rowan, with the red berries and I go there in the evening and you stand there and, Peter, it's the Gospel truth, how many times I refer to it as the altar, that's the altar. And these two trees, the crab apple tree and this one in the side, there are two candles there burning on the altar. This is the cross. The tree up here I see the stained glass window because they are all colours, the Japanese. It's BEAUTIFUL. Oh yes, you are, you are in heaven, to be honest. And it was just last night as I said, I takes the two dogs out for a walk every night. Last night it was raining pretty heavy [...] And I listened to the... and I put my hood on and it was pouring, peppering with rain on the hood and I was just listening to it that brook – whoosh like waterfalls. And I thought, Gospel truth, Peter, I thought to myself. That is very much like a human being starting its way in life. It only starts up there [...] comes down here, gathers more momentum. More water joins it and then it arrives in the wide big open ocean. And I thought the sea is vast and I thought to myself well I'm only a drop in the ocean and I put myself, how can you say, the kingdom of heaven is where this water is going to is vast, isn't it? Considering it only just started up there and it is gathering more and more, gaining more people and by the time it gets into the sea you are in. The kingdom of heaven is vast. [M1]

Not only the content of this passage but also the delivery revealed a very deep, spiritual view of this man's faith, brought up in the rural community all his life and able to make connections between his environment, his thoughts on life and faith and on the spiritual significance of signs in nature. It was a truly wonderful segment brought out from the depths of the riches of this person's life. It was the best example

of the rural environment informing faith and of the Divine visible in reality. What is illustrated here is this person's on-going theological reflection as he goes about his day-to-day work as a farmer, reflecting theologically not only on his immediate surroundings but on the vastness of the Kingdom of Heaven which is beyond.

Other people had images of Jesus as a symbol of something in reality; for example one woman narrates a frightening visit to the dentist's:

[...] I was in the chair; it must have been two hours and I was petrified and all I could see was, um. Jesus is the light of the world, you know holding the lamp, you know? [F3]

Clearly the language of the interview was the only way in to the people's beliefs. As such this short section does not do justice to the various ways in which the language could be analysed, dissected and interpreted.

Discussion of Research Question 2

The above presentation of results within RQ2 reveals a strong link between faith and practice, although it was not always evident that the interviewees could either express the link in linguistic or conceptual terms. None of the participants, for example, cited the book of James where the inextricability of faith and works is highlighted. Nor did any of them justify their faith by their works, in other words none of them stated that they were Christians because they attended church or because they were baptised. All of them, however, revealed a strong commitment to the practices, both sacramental those related to service both within the church and in the wider community. They did not state the relationship between their faith and their works and so did not express the feeling of *seeing God in the ordinary*, the title of Frost's book of a theology of the

everyday, (2000) but by illustrating their beliefs by their actions, some of the interviewees were doing just that.

In relation to the practices of the disciplines and the liturgy and sacraments, the interviewees differed in their habits. Whilst most of them were able to see the value of prayer and were affected deeply by the rituals and liturgy, it was perhaps surprising how few of them systematically read their Bibles independently of the Sunday services.

Baptism was seen as the foundation stone of the faith of all of the participants and it is a Sacrament which they view highly. They see its significance as transcending the physical and local and it is a mystical event, the later effect of which one can only watch and pray for in the lives of individuals. This would be in line with the assertion by Barrett who maintains that for a ritual to be successful and for it to be regarded as a religious ritual, it has to have two essential components: superhuman agency and an appropriate agent initiating the ritual. Barrett illustrates this by reference to the ritual of Baptism:

> *A Baptism is only a man (sic.) wetting an infant except that the man is understood to be acting in the place of a superhuman agent. Because ordinary cognitive resources are drawn upon to make sense of religious rituals, little cultural knowledge is necessary for groups of people to have converging ideas about what are the important features of a ritual structure* (2000: 32).

Again although not expressing it in such terms, the participants here were very conscious of the superhuman agent and all shared the cultural knowledge of what was significant within this ritual.

Baptism is also seen as an important ritual in the community at large. The study by Stringer (2008) carried out in Birmingham revealed that mothers who wanted to get their babies baptised did so not because of the theology but because they wanted to be 'good mothers' (Stringer, 2008: 31) and do the right thing for their babies, otherwise they may not get to heaven. This borders on the superstition and there was evidence of that in the responses by at least two respondents. The refusal of one priest to baptise an infant in the experience of one of the participants in this study resulted in an angry outburst when she criticised the right of the parent to have her child baptised, despite her lack of belonging to the congregation.

The Eucharist, according to Cruchley-Jones (2001: 117) has been the subject of some of the most bitter theological denominational disputes in relation to the extent to which, if at all, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus. The various interpretations exist on a spectrum with the transubstantiast view at the one end and the Reformer Zwingli's memorial on the other. The respondents in this study did not focus on the theological aspects of the Eucharist but on their own personal response to what, for them, was a highly treasured and personal experience. In this study it is significant that all of the participants focused on the individual as opposed to the corporate with their assertion of feeling as if it was them alone before Christ, despite the presence of others at the rail.

The questions did not ask them what they felt happened at the Eucharist as it was felt it would be too abstract for them to deal with. It was clear, however, that all participants found the Eucharist to be a tangible expression of their faith and in it they witnessed the presence of the divine, whether expressed verbally or not; the

expression on their faces and the longing for the reality to be re-created was evident. Again, in retrospect this was a missed opportunity.

Language is inextricably related to the expression of one's theology. Whilst it is true that *theology gives us rules for religious discourse that determine 'what it makes sense to say to God and about God'* (Astley, 2002: 25, citing Holmer, 1978: 141) which was discussed in the literature review in chapter 2, it is language which gives us one window into the theology of the individual believer. Deeds are of course illustrative of the theology and this research question has set both deeds and language side by side to endeavour to gain some insight into the theology illustrated by both.

In relation to the language used by the participants in this study, some isolated examples would conflict with the assertion made by Astley (2004: 124) that men's language was more objective and academic in relation to God-talk than women's, who tended to use metaphor more widely. The long example by the male participant cited above illustrates an eloquence to talk about the Divine in a rural context.

It was noted in chapter 2 that Sadgrove commented on the necessary dialogue between Mrs Murphy and her parish priest to enable mutual expression of their love of God. It is clear from this study that the participants, while confident in expressing their own anecdotal evidence of their faith, relied in one way or another on the priest, not as interpreter in the sense that they were not able to make sense of their faith or religious beliefs, but as a partner in the journey of faith. They all pointed to the mystery of the Eucharist and the importance of the Sacrament of Baptism but more than any topic they were confident with the structure and nature of the church. One

might see this simply as the difference between the concrete and the abstract but it could also be an indication of the importance they attributed to the infrastructure of the Church and its role in the liturgy in giving them a framework for their faith. Only one respondent who had a much broader and unconventional (in Anglican terms) experience of faith, was able to comment outwith the confines of the church. It may be that we have to conclude from this study that ordinary theologians do require their parish priest as a dialogic partner on the journey of faith or that may be a more Roman Catholic view.

Research Question 3 - From where do churchgoers gain their theology and how do they develop in their understanding of what they believe?

This question can be answered by concentrating on aspects of the interviewees past and present experiences, particularly relating to their own Christian upbringing, their education and their current theological and church learning.

Education

Most of those in this study, as already mentioned, have been steeped in religion or Christianity since birth. As such most of their formation in the faith came from family (F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F8, F9, F10, M2) in some cases extended family such as grandmother (F6, M1) or adoptive parents (F7). School, or church schools (F4, F6) played a significant role in their Christian education as did Sunday school and subsequent church-going. This foundation was portrayed as the bedrock of their Christian faith; it was presented as solid with lasting impact, since what was learned in childhood stuck with them during their lives. For some it was seen as an essential

element, despite the fact that they had times away from church; it was because of this foundation that they had the seeds sown which later bore fruit.

(sighs) well, I think the way you'd get the teaching across is you do have to start with the school. I know that there are multi-faiths in school but I think that it has to start with the day school, because I can remember things that I was taught in school, not in Sunday school, in schools; hymns that I sang in school are with me now. [F7]

Significant in their journey was, as has been seen above, Baptism and Confirmation and, for one person, the learning of the Catechism and the practicalities of taking the Eucharist were cited as important elements.

Little was offered in relation to on-going development of faith, with the exception of one participant who pointed out that development in faith was not the same as head knowledge which, although necessary, was not sufficient for growth:

All their theological training will only be head training and they'll never have anything else, poor things. [...] You may need [head training] because you'll have to understand Scriptures that were written in a different language two thousand years ago. [F6]

The exceptions to this were from those who attended specific *ad hoc* groups, which, in one church were called Lent and Advent groups and in another, the Study group. These were important for some because they provided a forum for questioning some of their beliefs and hearing the opinions and experiences of others:

That's why I love to go to these groups... to see how others view it, you know and, um, so I used to um go to the Bible groups [to hear] all their different views. Yeah, it's good, I think, you know, to see 'ow other people and you think 'well, I never looked at it like that'. [F3]

Another element for some people was the annual retreat, organised in two of the churches; a time when they spent a weekend in study and worship:

Well, it could be whatever you wanted it to be. It was on top of a hill, far away from everywhere, quite a beautiful place and we were given the opportunity if you wanted to be silent all day, that was fine. We had a service in the morning, um, and then we did some work on church things and there was time to do just as you wished and we had the Eucharist in the evening. It was really nice. [F2]

Some participants were well read and their reading had influenced their Christian development; the work of Mother Theresa, Theresa of Avila (F6) and Brother Lawrence (F1) had had an influence by their life-styles.

The world-wide course, Alpha, was mentioned by three of the participants but none had experience of it in the local context. It was seen as a successful model both of refreshing the fundamentals of the faith for believers but also for encouraging newcomers into the church.

- Sermons

In many ways the sermons in church linked to the discussion surrounding the Bible reading in two ways; the interviewees read the Bible stories, reflecting on sermons and they listened to sermons with the background of their Bible reading. No-one questioned the place of the sermon in the worship service and no sermons were criticised.

The main criterion by which the participants judged successful sermons was whether it had relevance to their every-day life. One sermon preached in two of the churches weeks prior to the interviews was recounted by more than one interviewee; it referred

to God's attitude to Christians who have busy lives and no time for Him. Reflecting on this one participant said:

There was a sermon a few weeks ago bout God not being able to be switched on like a light bulb. Um and how important it was for people to realise that [they need to] make time for God. [...] But God is always there. He gave the image of God trying to reach through to people: 'I'm here, I'm ready, I'm willing to listen' but we are too busy. [...] It was quite thought-provoking. [F2]

[Sermons] help you deal with situations that come along and put a religious view on it, yes, those are the ones that matter; it makes us think about how we're dealing with something. May be gives us insight of how we go about it. [F9]

This is an example of an attempt at theological reflection, where the content was a help in dealing with the realities of life, although the example of one such sermon did not perhaps illustrate it as one might imagine:

He did a sermon on the elderly, how they expected the world to owe them a living... it was ever so true at that time for me. [...] This sermon was so humorous in one way but so real. [F9]

Nevertheless, the sentiment was that sermons which could be related in some way to the situation in which one finds oneself tend to stick in your mind.

The difficulty of concentrating was noted by more than one participant but the comment was made that it was necessary to continue to listen to the whole sermon through the poor material in case a gem appeared.

The visual was thought to contribute to understanding and retention of sermons. One delivered by the Bishop some three years previously was recounted by two participants; it was a sermon aimed at the children and he had brought balloons to illustrate the various ways people respond to the Holy Spirit (some to 'pop', others fill up and then deflate and others retain the spirit and go on to higher things):

Yeah, it was for the children and it got me. I felt like a child. An' knowing probably what the kids was gonna say, oh but I thought that was brilliant. [F4]

In exploring the value of sermons for the individuals interviewed, it emerged that although they found some of them difficult to recall, they did sink in deep and probably influenced them in ways of which they were not aware. One person wanted more discussion about political topics and more relevance to every-day contemporary society.

- Hymns and music

Music featured both in the discussion about church and the services but also in relation to their private lives. All of them had favourite hymns which had inspired them or had influenced their thinking or behaviour or, more importantly for them, provided help, guidance and strength at times of particular difficulty. Many were able to recite, or even sing, their favourite hymns, which, for three of them, were Welsh hymns.

Ah yes, the vicar described it very well one day. Music, hymns, it is a prayer put to music. My favourite music is a hymn. I don't care what people think...I am singing hymns to myself all day love. [...] You look at William Williams Pantycelyn, Welsh hymn writer; well, the wording in a lot of those hymns. Well... you can't, it's just unbelievable. And to me, of course I am Welsh myself. And Anne Griffiths, lovely hymn writer again. [M1]

Those who could recite the hymns were able to comment on their significance for their life at one particular time:

I mean there was the hymn that I chose for [husband's] funeral that I remember singing in Sunday school and it probably seemed very childish to have that at a funeral, but the words of that I've never ever forgotten: 'the world is very beautiful, full of joy to me, the sun shines down in glory on everything I see' [...] It is about progression in life, being younger ... I can't remember the second verse but it starts

'and like a little pilgrim' and it's like going from a little pilgrim to being an older pilgrim to being a pilgrim and then dying. [-]

Apart from the fact that they liked the tune and that the words meant something special to them particularly at one time in their life, what the attitude towards hymns illustrates is the ingrained nature of them in their life.

The interaction between the environment and the hymn is illustrated by one person who had visited a parish by the sea where a special service entitled harvest of the sea was on. The hymn 'Will your anchor hold', being this person's favourite hymn was sung at this event:

[...] and they had the children there and the children had decorated the church and the fishermen had put all the nets all the way all around and the children had made every type of fish and octopus and things, crabs, lobsters, everything you could think of and they put cellophane over them, and they'd put the lights on them and they just looked although they were swimming in the sea. It was the most fantastic thing I'd ever seen. (laughs) And they sang that and I've never heard it sung better. [F1]

As illustrated above, some of these hymns were from childhood and had stuck with them all of their lives. The theology contained therein was, therefore, part of their being and they had grown up together.

• Suffering

One of the things which struck me as researcher in interviewing these people was the extent to which many of them had endured periods of intense suffering in their lives. Death of spouses, children, parents, accidents, illness and loss of sight had visited them in the course of their Christian life. Some of them had returned to the church and had had their faith strengthened by their experiences. As one person put it on the

death of a close relative: *I have had an answer [to prayer], haven't I? He's come to my rescue.* [-] This answer was very humbling in that it revealed a depth of faith and also a level of acceptance of a situation which was tragic but which, seen through the eyes of faith, has contributed to an outcome which this individual regarded as good. Whilst some commented on the fact that some had returned to church following the death of their husbands, it was not criticised but regarded as a fact. The people themselves who had returned to church in such circumstances were quite open about the fact and commented on the support they had received both from faith but also from the church community. All of them had returned and are making a substantial contribution to the life and work of the church; their return cannot be seen therefore as an opportunistic short-term one but has to be seen as an important landmark on their journey of faith. Some people commented on global suffering and injustice in the world and felt helpless in the face of it but felt compelled to pray for the situations and to help out wherever possible.

Discussion of RQ 3

In many ways the evidence for this research question permeates the whole discussion of ordinary theology, since it is not possible to separate something which for most people in the study is an integral part of themselves. Evidence has been presented from their experiences in life – in family, at school, in church in particular but not exclusive to there – which illustrates how they have come to their current situation. Relating back to the literature, however, it is clear that theological education, however, is not to be equated with academic or intellectual knowledge.

This study has shown that all of the participants gained their theology from the home, from school or from attending church. Their views have not been listened to or developed. The study cries out for something to be done both to work with but also to move their theology on. The findings confirm the suspicion expressed by Farley (1996a) who commented on the need for the Church to provide some programmed teaching. Of course one might argue that the liturgy as it is set out provides a systematic pathway through the bible and through the Church year. Evidence from attendance at many rural churches would suggest, however, that there is no systematic teaching and that the focus tends to be on practical hints of Christian living rather than the doctrines of the faith. Where faith is declared such as in the Creeds and in the Office, the language, albeit now modernised, seems not to be clear enough for people to understand what they are saying (the example cited in Astley and Christie (2007) in relation to the Nicene Creed and subsequent views illustrates this point very clearly). It could be argued that the participants need three things – systematic teaching, a vocabulary and syntax of faith and the opportunity for reflection.

The examples given of theological education by the participants seem to be on the first and third models discussed in the article by Elias (2006) and the benefits and limitations of both seem also to be raised. Some participants in commenting on the sermons were able to identify points which had been edifying or inspiring and which enabled them to cope with life, very much in line with the purposes outlined by Elias. Those who did attend the small groups such as the Advent and Lent groups found them particularly valuable not only from the point of view that they learned something from the vicar but that they learned from each other and were able to share their own story within a safe environment.

Where do the lay people get their theology from and how can it be developed, systematised or even corrected? If all one does is to listen to people's views and take them seriously, problems could arise. The church does have to take a stand on Biblical truths and simply to allow the congregation to air their views could lead to all sorts of confusions. This is the case in the Alpha course where the focus is on non-judgmental discussion groups and people are encouraged to voice their opinions and seek clarification for their views. If no orthodox position is given, it can result in even more confusion. Therefore, whilst it is agreed that there is a need for clergy to be more inclusive in listening to and taking seriously the congregational members, there is a need to teach them with a view to bringing some systematic order to their fragmented belief systems. One caveat here must be, however, that dogmatism has to be accompanied by reflection and by people having the opportunity and the space to process the teaching, to reflect on the impact of beliefs on their own view. Farley maintains that theology is concerned with believers' ways of existing in the world before God (cited in Astley and Christie, 2007: 4). An illustration of the reflection taking place at a very basic level is the studies undertaken in two of the churches as study groups. There the participants' interest was not only in what the vicar had to say, despite the fact that he was seen as a very knowledgeable fellow, but also in the views of others. There was clear evidence from a number of interviews that they learned from the opinions and experiences of others in the group. The role of the leader changed, then from teacher and leader to facilitator, although ultimately he was in a position to correct any inaccuracies or heresies which may arise in the discussions.

Astley and Christie (2007) issue a caution in any attempt to 'correct' the ordinary theology of others, in pointing out that if we only had humility to listen and to process

other people's theology, we might actually have to amend our own understanding of the Gospel as we learn from the views of others.

Summary

This chapter has presented evidence in answer to the first three research questions:

- What are the salient beliefs of ordinary church members?

- How do these participants express their theology?

- From where do believers gain their theology and how do they develop in their understanding of what they believe?

A wealth of data has been selected to illustrate the views of the 13 participants. The beliefs have been compared and contrasted with other studies. The following chapter presents evidence in support of the final two research questions and attempts to bring the various strands of the study together.

Chapter 5

Final discussion and conclusion

Introduction

In attempting to address the final research question, namely: *to what extent do these beliefs and practices constitute an ordinary theology?* this final chapter returns to the work of Astley primarily (Astley, 2002; Astley and Christie, 2007). It looks at the criteria relating to ordinary theology focusing in particular on the extent to which the data here conform to the broad definition of ordinary theology. It seeks also to situate the findings of this study into the broader area of the debate on the beliefs and practices of ordinary churchgoers and to make tentative recommendations on how to make churchgoers more confident and articulate about their own beliefs and practices. The chapter includes a description of the journey of the researcher and a detailed analysis of the limitations of this study, considering how things might have been done differently, in retrospect. Finally a number of related topics are considered for further more in-depth investigation either by this researcher or by others.

The data presented in the previous chapter give a unique insight into the beliefs and practices of a group of churchgoers in Mid-West Wales; the group is fairly representative of many rural parishes not only in Wales but in other parts of the UK. The majority consists of females and all of them are over 50, most in their 70s. They have had no formal academic theological training and, if the experiences of the time-frame of the study are representative, they have had very little theology either from sermons or from informal or formal courses. Most of their knowledge has come from their early up-bringing and experiences. The presentation of their faith and practices

in the interviews was rich in content, despite difficulties in finding the right words and expressions to say what they meant. There was no systematic theology evident but that was perhaps a function of the semi-structured interview which tended to follow their ideas rather than provide a rigid framework for discussion. They have never been asked to talk about their beliefs or practices in any formal, or indeed informal, way before. As such the findings of this study are unique. Similar to the view expressed by one participant mentioned by Astley and Christie (2007) that she was not important enough to be listened to and that very few members of the congregation were asked what they were thinking, this emerged in some of the current interviews. Participants in this study did not say that they were not important, but it was clear in all of the interviews that their views, experiences and opinions in relation to theology had never been explored in the past. One member of the group (F3) made the point that in 60 years she has never been asked about what she believes.

In order to ascertain the extent to which the findings presented in this study constitute what has been termed 'ordinary theology', it is necessary to look at what ordinary theology is.

The beliefs and practices illustrated in this study are certainly ordinary in that they are the beliefs and practices of the ordinary, untheolgically trained churchgoer; it is not academic and not the preserve of the clergy, but is it theology? In answering this part of the question, we need to return to some of the definitions of theology outlined in the second chapter to ascertain whether what the data reveal, is theology. Green's (1990) definition of theology is as follows: *an active and critical ministry. It investigates and reflects upon God's presence and activity in our lives, and asks what*

that means for us (1990: 12). There would certainly be enough evidence in these interviews to suggest that the individuals in the study were focusing on the presence of God/Jesus in their lives and they made some attempt to analyse what that meant for them, both in terms of their living their own lives but also in serving the church and the community. Taking this further, it was implied by Astley (2002) that within ordinary theology there was the emphasis on the practical 'doing' theology, also in the title of Green's work (1990). The practical element which emerged from these transcripts suggested that the churchgoers, whether consciously or unconsciously were engaged in actually 'doing theology' in their own contexts and in their own way, whether in church or in society. It is perhaps the fact that not all were actually conscious of their action, that may shed some doubt on whether what we have here conforms to ordinary theology. Certainly when asked about elements of their beliefs and practices, the interviewees could focus on their answers to questions. What was lacking, however, was any sense that they were actively engaged in theology. There is very little evidence of theological reflection and seeing society through a theological lens (there were notable exceptions, of course, such as the woman who saw Jesus in various situations and the woman who had views on the church not taking enough of a stand against global issues).

If we conclude tentatively, therefore, that there may be elements of the findings which constitute ordinary theology, it is now necessary to weigh the evidence against the characteristics of ordinary theology found in Astley's work, the main elements of which have been presented and analysed in chapter 2. Described as: *the often halting, poorly-expressed, non-technical and unsystematic reflections on their faith* (Astley and Christie, 2007: 6) the beliefs and practices of churchgoers is a subject

worthy of study, of taking seriously and of having a role in the Church. There was evidence of the theological stammering mentioned by Ramsey (cited in Astley and Christie, 2007: 7) and of the halting delivery cited above. According to Astley and Christie, ordinary theology is not a homogenous body of knowledge and *it comes in a variety of forms* (2007: 23). They describe this as a working theology (op. cit.: 7) and comment that, statistically speaking, ordinary theology is the theology of the church, since very few people, including clergy (post-ordination), indulge in the academic study of theology. Astley and Christie (2007: 21) comment that ordinary theology is expressed in isolated fragments as opposed to a full worked-out theology or belief-system. According to them these fragments *are based on a common association with the church rather than by their logical relation to one another* (citing Towler, 1974: 153). There is certainly evidence in the previous chapter which would amount to isolated fragments and they are all related in some way to the church. To that extent there is evidence of theological beliefs and practices.

Unlike the dichotomy drawn by Astley (2002) between the academic theologians and the unschooled laity, however, this distinction does not appear to exist in such stark contrast in the rural context. Those engaged at any level of study, the clergy, are very much part of the people. Lay ministry is taken seriously and people are encouraged to integrate their beliefs into their lives and into their communities. It may be that one group is more aware of the theological terminology and has a greater awareness of the theological significance of their beliefs and practices, but, in general what the church encompasses is the beliefs and practices of individual believers.

Astley and Christie (2007) maintain that if the Church is to grow or even to survive in the 21st century it needs to listen to the members of the congregation and to take their views seriously; in so doing they will be listening to 'ordinary theology. This 'lay theology' (*ibid*: 4) resides with the laity and the non-expert has to have its origins somewhere. Astley and Christie (2007) point out that academic theology emerged originally from ordinary theology and that ordinary theology continues below the more systematic concepts and arguments which are part of theological education.

Astley and Christie (2007: 24) do not consider academic, systematic theological study either appropriate or necessary for ordinary theologians; rather they note that these people have *'an imaginative grasp,' 'attention' or 'sensitivity' to context and situations*. They argue that what these people lack in cognitive skills can be compensated for by these. Ordinary theology can be compatible with depth of spiritual insight but is not the same as intellectual cleverness and such theology can be very profound despite the fact that it may be *concrete* and *literal-minded* (*ibid.*).

One difference between academic and ordinary theology is the process by which those engaging in each progress approach the discipline. Students of academic theology inform their thinking and their views by reading. By following a course of academic study, they develop their understanding and can see theological concepts from various view points. By engaging with the historical and contemporary debates, they establish a database of theology which informs their own lives. Those engaged in doing 'ordinary theology', on the other hand, are simply leading their own lives in the context of a faith society, the church. As such they are reliant on experience and any

teaching they receive formally or informally in the church context. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that their theology remains largely at the level of the anecdotal, experiential and, on several points is inaccurate. Certainly much of the evidence of the previous chapter was presented in the context of anecdotes and personal history which is one of the main criticisms levelled against ordinary theology and outlined by Astley (2002: 125ff.). The criticisms were that ordinary theology was too varied, too confused, too incoherent and unsystematic, too concrete and anthropomorphic, too biographical, too personal, too subjective and relative; too superstitious and, finally, too uncritical. The qualifier 'too' indicated that it ordinary theology could not be regarded as academic theology because of these criticisms. If we omit the word 'too' and allow the adjectives to provide a base-line for discussing ordinary theology, the conclusion may be that ordinary theology may be all of these things but, despite all of these criticisms, it is a domain worthy of study and a genre which has been neglected. Many of the examples in the previous chapter would certainly appear to contain elements of these criticisms. From the various interviews, it was not possible to construct a systematic theology. There were aspects of the interviews which could be described as incoherent and lacking clarity. Certainly the main focus was on the subjective, personal and biographical and the aspects of the interview which focused on the concrete were more productive than the parts which dealt with more abstract concepts such as faith.

In some sense the beliefs and practices evidenced by the participants did not correspond with what Stringer (2008) calls 'situational beliefs'; admittedly they were neither organised nor systematic but they were in general 'orthodox', that is to say

that they conformed to the Christian orthodoxy, with perhaps the exception of the few views about the superstitious value of Baptism.

It is true to say, however, that aspects of what is represented here would conform to elements of pew theology (Thomson, 2006) which finds expression within the church and in many ways in interaction with the theology of the clergy; this dialogue between ordinary churchgoers and clergy is also reminiscent of the comments made by Sadgrove (2008) who referred to the inter-play of theology between the clergy and laity as essential to ordinary churchgoers' theology. There would be insufficient evidence in the transcripts to suggest that the beliefs and practices of these churchgoers conformed to what Clark (1982) and Towler (1974) would term common religion. The beliefs and practices here were all more or less in line with denominational orthodoxy, but perhaps the context of the interview and indeed the structure of the questions within the interview did not allow enough scope for the participants to stray to any extent from orthodox lines. This relates to the extent to which the answers given by the interviewees may have been restricted or facilitated by the framework and by the structure of the interview itself; this will be dealt with in the section on limitations of the study.

Language and theology

In chapter 2 a tentative claim was made that some similarities could be identified between the process of learning or acquiring a language and theology or a knowledge of God. Although not designed to test this hypothesis clinically, some interesting observations can be made from the experiences of the churchgoers in this project. All of the interviewees in this study had been immersed in church from birth; most had been baptised as infants and had kept links with the church throughout their lives (one or two had left and returned, although they did not necessarily abandon their faith during their time away from church). Familiarity with the elements of faith, the fact that they were immersed in church culture from birth, at a time when it was customary to go to church without thinking about it, ensured that they imbibed the language and practices of faith. The liturgy became automatic, the form familiar and the routine regular. As a result they appear, in linguistic terms, to have 'plateaued' or 'fossilized' (Selinker, 1972), having reached a certain stage and remained there, without realising it and without experiencing any need for progression, or indeed without any awareness that progression was possible or desirable. Their theology had become automatic; without any systematic teaching or experience (with the odd exception in the interviews), and as a result had become unconscious, not just sub-conscious. A comparison with the mother tongue can justifiably be made. Having acquired the language from birth when one is steeped in the naturalistic environment and one is unable to reflect on the rules because the rules are not familiar; completely fluent in a restricted vocabulary without a conscious understanding of the grammatical rules, one is unable to articulate the elements which constitute the language but are able to communicate in it with others of the same language. This seems to be the case in the homogenous group represented by this study; the rules are subconsciously part of a closed group in which the rules are not articulated but everyone knows. Society

outside is not familiar either with the language or with the structure of the routine; as such they perceive no need to become part of the church because the church has become an irrelevance to them, speaking a language which, as far as they are concerned, has died out and ceased to have any impact either on society in general or on their lives in particular. One can recall the words of Cruchley-Jones (2001) mentioned in the previous chapter that the language of the liturgy had become an anachronism.

The art of theological reflection which might lead to more theological awareness, is not practised by the people in this study because they have not been trained its use. Most were not able to make connections between their beliefs, their faith, the church and the world outside. They do not communicate among themselves about aspects of faith, although they practise their beliefs in their works. What appears to be missing, however, is the link between theology and the reality and it is that which requires the response. In order to make this connection they need to 'learn' the language of faith and the structure of their faith; they need the language with which to communicate their faith. In a certain sense 'familiarity breeds contempt'; the elements of their faith, beliefs and practices have become so automatic over a period of up to 80 years that it is part of their being, not something they possess. Acquisition may be sufficient for childhood but that for adults to grow into Christian maturity, a more systematic offering of education at the cognitive level is appropriate.

To a certain extent, therefore, these participants in rural Wales are ordinary theologians; they are not aware of the rules of theology, not possessing a systematic theology, neatly packaged according to topics, or theological concepts, but they live

out the faith, demonstrating their beliefs through their practices but embodying an ordinary theology in their lives.

Recommendations

Having surveyed the literature and outlined the main findings of the study and concluded with some general remarks of what constitutes ordinary theology, this section makes some recommendations. At the end of every research project, there is always the question: 'so what?' which merits a response. Did the investigation reveal any new information, or did it simply confirm a hypothesis or provide any new insights into already existing phenomena?

The study revealed that the average believer in churches in rural Mid-Wales is over 60, has been attending the local rural parish most of her (usually) life and has been serving in church for most of that time, in various capacities at various stages in their life. The main focus of their faith IS the church and it is there that they have experienced the main milestones in their lives – Baptism, Sunday school, confirmation, marriage, baptism of children, and, in some cases death of spouses. Although they experience the reality of their faith in their daily personal lives and in their communities, the most important feature of their faith is the church building, the church community and all that takes place within the church.

They communicated their faith in a personal, and at times, anecdotal fashion and were able to identify times in their lives when a personal faith was very important for them; this may have been at times of divorce, health difficulties or death of a family member. Many people had some difficulty in finding the words adequately to

describe what they felt and the transcripts yielded very little which could be regarded as theological reflection. They had difficulty both with vocabulary and syntax in expressing what, for them, was inexpressible. It may be that this is because they did not have the words or because they had never had occasion to try and talk about these things or that they were concerned about the lack of orthodoxy of what they were thinking. It must be borne in mind, however, that none of them had been asked to talk about their faith before and that it was quite clear that when the discussion strayed from the concrete and the anecdotal that they became hesitant. This was evident, for example, in discussion about the significance of Baptism and what was happening at the Eucharist. The caveat must be issued, however, that the answers could have been a function of the questions and that the questioning was not refined enough to facilitate their thinking and articulation of ideas.

Whilst the arguments for the personal level of faith are true, it is also true that the interview data revealed a lack of systematic theology, despite the general uniformity of the domains of questioning. The theology experienced by these believers was imbibed from the home, Sunday school, catechism or confirmation classes and, in the few cases where reading was mentioned, from Scripture and other theological texts. Some information had been gleaned from *ad hoc* classes such as the Advent and Lent groups mentioned by some participants or from other courses such as Alpha. In chapter 2 the literature relating to theological and religious education was reviewed; a dichotomy between experience and learning was highlighted. Whilst the individuals in this study were able to produce substantial evidence of their faith from experience, few, if indeed any, revealed any theological learning.

The first recommendation, therefore, is for a more systematic approach to teaching in churches. If individuals in churches are to be nurtured in the faith, they require a significant increase of 'input' in order for them to be able to formulate what might be termed ordinary theology. In other words, they need more material with which to construct a theology, more knowledge on which to base their faith. This should be systematic and seek to teach the congregation the basics of the faith, along the lines of the systematic teaching espoused by Farley (1996a).

It is the contention of the present author, that if we are going to take ordinary theologians and to give them more confidence in expressing their faith and in interpreting their world from the standpoint of faith, the church needs to interact with them at a more sophisticated level. Whilst not denying the fact that progression in terms of theological knowledge need not be defined in terms of systematic theological progression and, whilst acknowledging that people can learn in faith from their everyday experiences, there is nevertheless a gap which needs to be bridged. If people do not know what they do not know and if they have little idea as to what the fundamentals of the faith are, it is important for the church to provide theological education to help bridge this gap.

The second recommendation is that we need to give believers firstly a vocabulary and then a grammar of faith, a lens through which and a tool with which they can express themselves more articulately and more confidently in faith. For many in this group of participants, it will amount to teaching words and concepts for what they already believe; for example labelling concepts which are the fundamentals of the faith. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it was clear from this and from the study

conducted by Peddle (2008) that the participants were unfamiliar with terms such as the Atonement.

A third recommendation, related to the previous two, is that the church needs to set up a programme of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) or possibly CTE (Continuing Theological Education) for congregations. Such provision is mandatory for the clergy and, I would argue, should be a part of the churches' provision for believers; a programme of development should be drawn up which takes believers further along their journey of faith and in a systematic way. Mercer (2006: 165) in advocating a model of systematic adult theological education states:

> *Adult education in congregations ought to foster the ability of adult Christians to engage in every-deepening, increasingly sophisticated knowledge and practices of faith. It should equip learners to matter in the world – to act in ways that engender healing, reconciliation, and hope. It should offer them the information they need to become skilled and sensitive interpreters of sacred texts that give them stories to live by.*

In addition it should enlarge their view of God and equip them to participate in the community of faith. Mercer calls this engaging in *critically reflective practice*.

The fact that very few in this study engaged in personal Bible study or any theological reading gives some cause for concern. Programmes such as Alpha and Emmaus are useful for a 'back to basics' course but there is a need for more advanced, systematic teaching which involves progression. How and when this takes place is a matter for discussion at Parish, Deanery and Diocesan level.

Finally, putting all these together practical training needs to be provided in the emerging area of theological reflection, so that what is taught does not remain head knowledge. Accepting the challenge issued by Astley (2002) and by Astley and

Christie (2007) to take the views of the congregation seriously and adding to that the need for some structure to this, the findings of this study point to the need for a forum in order to allow both to take place, that is to say, for people to be able to express their views but also for reflection, with correction where necessary, to take place. They recommend a two-way theological dialogue or a small group context where people can be helped to understand and articulate their theology. One model which may be appropriate for this balanced approach is the Pastoral Cycle of Green (1990). The four stage model leads the group from experience with exploration of these experiences, towards reflection. At the reflection stage there is then a response which leads back on to new experiences which then are the focus of the discussion. Such a theological reflection cycle could harness the views of the participants whilst taken them on to the next spiral of the cycle. In this way there would be development, growth of both understanding and experience. It should also result in greater confidence in the laity that they have something to say and something to offer society. Because they have not been asked about their beliefs, they assume that the deeply held convictions and their experiences of life lived through faith are either of no interest or are not worthy of consideration. The establishment of such a group in a rural setting should lead to a greater self-confidence in the laity which, in turn, would inform the clergy about the 'ordinary' theology and the lay theology sitting in the pews. This is just one model from the developing area of models of theological reflection which might be worth implementing in the church context. Other models of theological reflection would provide a variety of approaches to suit individual groups or contexts; for example the works of Graham et al (2005, 2007) and Kinast (2000) give details of a styles of theological reflection which could be used as groups which

are more mature and have more experience with the principles and practices of theological reflection.

The result of the above should be greater self-confidence in believers, greater relevance of beliefs for living in the 21st century and a more confident voice emanating from the Church which might even encourage society to take notice that the church has something to say and is not an anachronism which is tolerated but a resource which is fully utilised (and by this I do not just mean the church hall as a village resource). If churches in rural Wales are not to die out completely, as has happened in several areas of the country already, the church needs to equip the faithful who remain within its doors to go out of the doors and live confident, informed Christian lives. Apichella (2001) refers to the church's older generation as a hidden asset; in the context of rural churches in Wales, they are not the hidden asset, they are the *only* resource available and the future of the church hinges on not only their involvement but on their ability to share the riches of the faith with future generations.

An alternative approach to these recommendations, however, which may be criticised for imposing a certain orthodoxy on the churchgoers, is the approach taken by Cruchley-Jones in his work with congregations in urban Wales. In developing his metaphor of the church in exile (described briefly in chapter 4), he seeks to develop a *theology from below* (Cruchley-Jones, 2008: 21) in which he states that there is: *None of the triumphant God-talk of the Christendom era, which still dominates our hymnody, liturgy and ecclesiology, can be used in this situation of exile.* Such an approach may be necessary to reach those outside the church, those who are

lamentably absent and who are many of the families of those interviewed for this study. Those who have no apparent interest in belief or religious practice but choose not to engage with aspects of faith. Perhaps a more radical approach is needed to re-engage the communities, even rural communities, in their own theology.

Scope and limitations of the study

The study presented a detailed analysis of the religious and church life of the 13 people in the group from three rural congregations. Despite the small numbers, the 13 people interviewed represented the main characteristics of most churchgoers in rural Wales, that is to say, a majority of women, all in the latter part of their lives and with a lifetime of church-going in their background.

The originality of the study lay in the access gained to hitherto untapped data – none of these people had ever spoken in a formal, or indeed informal, way about their faith before; one woman had never heard the sound of her own voice on a tape recorder prior to this interview. What has been captured is a cross-sectional snapshot of beliefs and practices in rural churches in Mid-Wales. The openness which the participants granted to the researcher to ask any questions, the honesty with which the people responded and the vignettes from their lives and the sometimes painful memories, all add to the tapestry which is presented. As such this study represents a contribution, albeit modest, to what is known about people's beliefs and practices in a rural context. Although contributing to the debate on theological reflection on ordinary theology, however, the small-scale nature of this study contains many limitations. The findings are limited to the context in which the research was carried out, that is to say no generalisations about belief or theology can be stated about believers in other

churches either within the denomination or the locality. As a predominantly Welsh-speaking area, the subjects chosen to be interviewed were speaking English, whether this was their mother tongue or not; what was said, therefore, may have been filtered through an English-medium lens or the participants as English native speakers may not be representative of faith in this particular community. The fact that the study failed to engage the population of the local Welsh-speaking chapels also presents a rather one-sided, necessarily denominationally specific, view of the church in rural Wales. The age profile of the interviewees is towards the older age range and may not give a flavour of the views of contemporary younger generation who choose to attend church. It was neither possible, nor desirable, however, to try and artificially construct a sample group which would not have been representative of the local rural churches. The age range of those who volunteered is 50+ with only one participant in the 50 age bracket. In all three churches represented, however, on regular Sundays there would be very few, if indeed any, congregation members. Another limitation in getting at a more holistic picture of rural church life, was the exclusion of one group, namely those who did not engage with the church as an institution but may have had experience of church in the past or have their own theology or religious beliefs which they practised outwith the context of the church.

Van der Ven (1993: 123f.) states that for theological reflection to take place, two conditions have to be satisfied, both of which refer to the need for the researcher either to have or to acquire an adequate knowledge of the literature pertinent to the questions under investigation. Pattison (2000: 143) notes that in engaging in theological reflection it is necessary for one to be aware of one's limitations and to be self-critical. Similarly Avis (2003: 123) comments that one of the major limitations

of many empirical projects within the area of theology is that the researchers, whilst theologically competent, lack theological skills, with the result that the research questions asked on religious belief can be crude and inept. The researcher's lack of theological knowledge may have resulted in a less theological conversation in some interviews than ought to have been the case. In some instances both interviewer and interviewee struggled to articulate both the question and the answer; some examples were highlighted in this and in the previous chapter. It could be, however, that the participants would still have struggled to express themselves and that the theological reflection has to take place outside the interview where more time for reflection is possible.

The journey of the researcher

Every research work changes those involved in it, both as researchers and participants. My journey in the process has been one which has moved me from researcher within the context of education to theology; *en route* I have explored the use of social science methods in investigating theological perspectives. What struck me most was the inadequacy of the interview as a sole instrument to get to the core of someone's beliefs and the inadequacy of language to express things which affect one's innermost being. Hindsight is a wonderful thing and if I had the opportunity to do this study again from scratch, I would narrow the focus considerably and investigate less material through an increased number of instruments, such as diary or journal to follow some thought processes over time, focus groups and use more imaginative techniques such as the use of stimuli for unstructured narrative. However inadequate the results might be, this study nevertheless presents an entry into the ordinary beliefs of ordinary rural dwellers in Wales and, as such, presents an original

piece of work which will be of interest to those involved in research into ordinary theology as well as to those involved in ministry in rural parishes.

Future work

This study has merely scratched the surface of what is a relatively untapped source of data. There are many avenues which could follow from this study, of which a few are highlighted here.

- The nature of this study was very broad and lacked the focus on individual elements of belief in comparison with, for example, the work of Christie (2005) who concentrated on ordinary Christology. It may be advantageous to limit the scope of a future study to permit the exploration in greater depth of individual dimensions of faith, for example, views on the Bible and the impact it has on their beliefs and actions.

- The degree to which the participants were reflecting theologically was very limited in most interviews. The study has revealed a need for much more training in theological reflection for church members, so that the impact of their faith in their everyday lives might extend beyond the simple 'being nice to people' and 'doing anything to help others'. It would give them skills to reflect theologically on their lives, their circumstances, the church and their involvement in society. One possibility from this study might be the establishing of small theological reflection groups which might work through the pastoral cycle and be trained in the art of theological reflection. This could be presented as an action research project and could develop organically within different theological contexts.

- This study has revealed some similarities with the views expressed by interviewees in a rural context in Newfoundland and Labrador (Peddle, 2008).

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The similarities are not reflected in the status of the church in the Welsh rural environment. A comparative study using a common, but culturally sensitive instrument, would provide interesting contextual comparable data.

- This study has focused exclusively on the more traditional rural theological settings; a similar study conducted with urban and/or more evangelical or Anglo-catholic churches would provide another angle. In addition, involving the Welsh-speaking chapel people, interviewed through the medium of Welsh would also provide an added dimension.

- The tentative findings of this study would benefit from further exploration within the context of the relatively new cognitive science of naturalness of religion, referred to in the second chapter (Barrett, 2000).

Conclusion

Although a small-scale study with tentative links to ordinary theology, this project has given an insight into the beliefs and practices of a group of churchgoers, faithful over decades, in many ways possibly the last cohort of those who have been steeped in religion since birth, brought up in the Church in an era when church-going was the *sine qua non* of belonging to a community. Phenomenology as a method was designed to let the people who had experienced a phenomenon, speak about their experiences. This study has opened a window on faith and works in a rural community and as such it has allowed the people to speak. It is now up to the researcher and to subsequent readers to listen and to respond.

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APPENDIX A

Information for Participants

Appendix A

Beliefs and Practices in Rural Wales

Introductory information sheet

I am looking for help from people in local rural churches where I spent some months on placement. I am working on a research project on people's beliefs and practices.

The study is designed to find out the main beliefs or ordinary people who attend a rural church in Wales. Little is known about the beliefs of those who attend churches across the country. There are no right or wrong answers; I simply want to find out what people who have no formal theological training, think about aspects of faith and the Church.

If you would like to participate or would like more information on the project and what it will entail, please contact me, details below:

Professor Peter Neil
Work Tel: 01970 622102
Home Tel: 01970 624263

e-mail: psn@aber.ac.uk

What I am looking for is people to agree to be interviewed for approximately an hour. The interview will ask questions about church, beliefs, etc. There are no qualifications or experience required. All enquiries will be treated in confidence; no-one will know that you have contacted me and all information will be confidential.

I very much would like to learn more about the views of friends in [names of Welsh villages].

Thank you in advance for considering this request.

Appendix A

Beliefs and Practices: Participant Information Sheet

Introduction to the study
You are being invited to take part in this study. Before committing yourself to it, please read the following guidelines which give you further information.

What is the study about?
This study is designed to find out the main beliefs of ordinary people who attend a rural church in Wales. Little is known about the beliefs of those who attend churches across the country. There are no right or wrong beliefs; I simply want to find out what people who have no formal theological training, think about aspects of faith and the Church.

Who is the researcher?
I am conducting this piece of research as part of a degree at Cardiff University in the Department of Religious and Theological Studies. It is also a study to inform me more about local churches as I prepare for ordination.

Why have I been chosen?
I am interested in finding people who attend church regularly and who are members of a church within a rural environment.

What do I have to do?
I would like to invite you to be interviewed for one hour on why you go to church, what you believe etc. I may come back to you at a later date for further information or to check if I have understood something you said on tape correctly.

What will happen to the information I give and will the information be confidential?
All information gathered will be confidential. It will be recorded so that I can listen to it again and do further work on it. The recording will only be listened to by myself and by my supervisor and the transcriber and will be used for the sole purpose of thi study. The data will be stored securely in accordance with the Data Protection Act. You will not be identified in the final dissertation and no-one will know you have taken part. All references to you in the dissertation will be anonymous. The study has

been approved by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

When will the interview take place?
Interviews will be held between November 2007 and January 2008. The final dissertation should be completed by September 2008.

Can I withdraw?
Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. I would reserve the right to use the information given in the interview.

Contact information
If you would like to discuss any of this further, please do not hesitate to contact me:

Professor Peter Neil
Work Tel: 01970 622102
Home Tel: 01970 624263

e-mail: psn@aber.ac.uk

Appendix A

Beliefs and Practices

Consent Form

Name of Researcher: Peter Neil

	Please initial
1 I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2 I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.	
3 I agree to take part in the study.	

_____   _____   _____
Name of participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____
Name of person taking consent   Date   Signature

2 copies: 1 for research file, 1 for participant.

APPENDIX B

Details of Interviewees

Appendix B

Details of participants

Code	Gender	Nat. ID	Age	Interview	Duration (minutes)	Location	Church
F1 *	Female	English	70+	26.10.07	70	Int. Home	B
F2	Female	Welsh	50+	12.1.08	54	Res. Home	B
F3	Female	Welsh	70+	14.1.08	50	Int. Home	B
F4	Female	English	60+	21.1.08 =	62	Int. Home	A
F5	Female	English	60+	22.1.08	38	Int. Home	A
F6	Female	English	60+	23.1.08	58	Res. office	C
F7	Female	Welsh	60+	24.1.08	45	Int. Home	A
F8	Female	Welsh	80	26.1.08	51	Res. Home	B
F9	Female	English	60+	28.1.08	55	Int. Home	C
F10	Female	Welsh	60+	28.1.08	38	Int. Home	B
M1	Male	Welsh	60+	16.1.08	65	Res. Home	B
M2	Male	English	60+	17.1.08	55	Int. Home	B
M3	Male	English	70+	21.1.08 =	62	Int. Home	A

* - pilot interview (data included with main results)
= two participants interviewed together

Churches

A – rural church, average Sunday attendance 30-40
B – rural church, average Sunday attendance 15-20
C – rural church, average Sunday attendance 10-15

APPENDIX C

Details of Church Observations

Appendix C

Observations

The observations conducted in the three churches are presented here as illustrative of the various contexts with which the interviewees would have been familiar. The researcher was present as 'trainee' in each of the churches for a period of at least 15 weeks. The following section on churches A, B and C is descriptive in nature but should be illustrative of the contexts in which the interviewees are worshipping.

The area in which all three churches are located is, in terms of vicars, in a very perilous state. Due to retirements, illness and pending retirements, there are circa 15 churches without a permanent priest or stable pastoral arrangement. This puts strain on the current priests and particularly lay readers who may be called to service in parishes outwith their own on an ad hoc basis.

Church A – is the largest of the three congregations as represented by an average attendance of between 30-40 on most Sundays; the congregation is made up of mostly older members (60+), although there are a few younger families involved. The priest of this church is also responsible for church B and for a smaller Welsh-speaking congregation. There is also a lay reader whose services are called upon regularly to assist, particularly in Welsh-speaking churches during vacancy or vacation of other priests. Services at church A are at 1045 on Sundays, three of which are the Eucharist services and one Morning Prayer; on the months where there are five Sundays a joint service is held in a rotational basis in one of the three churches for which the priest (priest D) is responsible. The worship is traditional with the 2004 Eucharist service and the 1984 Morning Prayer book used; Morning Prayer is sung. On Sundays there

is a Sunday-School which is held at the same time as the main service, although the children participate in the latter part of the Eucharist service and take a significant role at Christmas and Easter services. Family services are held occasionally although they do not attract many additional families on these Sundays. The wardens are active but there is relatively little involvement of the congregation in the actual liturgy, compared with church B, for example. The vicar holds study groups for the four weeks of Advent and Lent to which about 20 people come from churches A and B; the material used during these groups has been the Diocesan publication, Menter (chk). The sermons last about 12-15 minutes and generally begin with an illustration and focus on a text. Each sermon is individually contained with no coherent links between sermons. The Alamanc is used for the readings and readings are placed on the notice-board so that the congregation can prepare themselves before worship. The village in which the church is located is predominantly Welsh-speaking. The congregation would mostly be Welsh speakers but there are some very active non-Welsh-speaking people who attend and feel fully integrated. All services are bilingual, with a consistent pattern of Welsh and English used from the respective book. Sermons are in English generally with a few Welsh sentences either at the beginning and/or used as summaries at various points in the sermon. It is a very friendly church with several events held during the year such as the Gymanfa Canu (singing festival), a strawberry tea which are used as fund-raising events for the church. Recently the church has become partner in a community lunch-time club for the village; a new kitchen was installed in the church hall and the hall is seen as a community resource. There is also a Women's Guild which meets regularly and to which most of the women in the congregation belong. The community sees the church as a resource and there are Baptisms and Weddings which are held for families

with only tenuous, if any, links to the church. There was a period at the end of the observation in which several funerals took place. In terms of building work, the church installed a new sound system which has greatly improved audibility for those hard of hearing and has allowed the playing of music to enhance worship before and after the services. Once per month they offer tea at the end of the service, served at the back of the church.

Church B – is linked to church A in that the same priest serves both churches. This is a smaller congregation of about 15-20 people, the vast majority of whom are 60+ with several in the late 60s and beyond. There is no Sunday school and no mid-week services. The congregation is mostly Welsh-speaking as the area is in the heart of Welsh mid-Wales, although inclusive of English people who have come to the area. The service is at 915 on Sundays, with similar pattern of worship outlined above for church A. Of the three, this church is the most active in fund-raising activities with BBQs, ball races, raffles, harvest thanksgiving, Gymanfa Canu (alternating with church A) and other activities. At these activities, the whole community seems to gather. When asked why they did not attend Sunday worship, two main reasons were given; either they were active members of the Welsh chapels or they came from other parishes to support the work of the church because of contacts they had with church members. Others stated that they would attend but, unfortunately, they had work responsibilities at home, usually involved in the farming industry. The church shares the Lent and Advent Group as above. The worship is the same as church A. By contrast the participation rate in worship is much higher than in church A, with a rota of members to read the lessons and to take the intercessions; per head of church member, there is much more involvement in this church. At the end of many services,

the Wardens or the church secretary call meetings to discuss aspects of management of the church, mostly, but not exclusively, related to finances. During my observation period the church had planned the installation of sound equipment and the purchase of a new organ. There was also a clear-out of the church hall and a re-wiring undertaken. All of this is co-ordinated by two very active wardens, without whose participation and commitment, the church would not continue to exist either financially or as a community of worshippers. The one negative element I experienced from participating in worship both at this church and church A was that the vicar had to leave fairly promptly after the service to allow him to arrive in time at the other church; this meant that he had little, if any, time to interact with the congregation members at the door. It was interesting to note that more participants from this church proportionally (7 in total which represents almost 50% of the active population), opted to take part in this study; the reasons for this are not immediately apparent.

Church C – is one of four churches in a group served by one priest. During the observation period the priest, although present every week, was suffering a particularly intense period of ill health. He is assisted by a Reader and by readers from other parishes who take individual services on a rotational basis in each of the four churches. Services at this church start at 1100 on Sundays and are Eucharist services on three weeks, followed by a Morning Prayer (said liturgy) on the fourth Sunday, taken by a reader from a neighbouring parish. The liturgy used is the 2004 Eucharist and 1984 Morning Prayer. The services are mostly in English, with one reading in Welsh and a small section of the prayers said in Welsh. Sermons are about 10-12 minutes in length and usually focus on teaching from the readings in the

Almanac. Sometimes links are made with previous sermons to give greater coherence to the teaching. A joint bible study group is held once per month for all four churches and the material used was the Diocesan material; attendance at this was rather low but this could have been because the classes had been sporadic during the vicar's ill health. The congregation would be relatively small, 10-15, although this would double during special services such as Harvest, Easter and Christmas. I only witnessed the harvest thanksgiving dinner at which the whole community seemed to be present (60+). The explanation for their non-attendance at Sunday services was that many of those at this dinner would be active members of the local Welsh chapel, as was the case with church B above. There is no Sunday school provision and no children attend the service. There would be a few members in the 'middle age' group and some at the older age range. Generally there was participation by readers in the service although the intercessions tended to be taken by the priest.

APPENDIX D

Interview Schedule

Beliefs and Practices

Semi-structured interview – final version

Before we start I need to say a few things:

Firstly thank you for volunteering for the project. Secondly, just to assure you that no-one else knows that you are participating (unless you have told them yourself) and your identity will be concealed throughout. I will give you a code which will mean that you can identify yourself from the written report. The third thing I need to say is that there are no right and wrong answers to this; it is not a test and I do not have any ideas in advance of the interviews what I will find out. There has been very little work done in the area of ordinary people's beliefs, so what you tell me will be of interest anyway. If you do not have an opinion, there is no need to think one up on the spot; simply tell me that you have not thought about this area. I appreciate that we do not normally talk in depth about such issues and we are trying to find words and phrases to express complex and sometimes very deep things. There is no need to use big words or theological or religious language; you can if you know the terms, but please use your own words to express your own thoughts and feelings. If I am unsure of anything you say I will tell you so and will ask for clarification; we may have to work some things out together. The interview will take about an hour. So we will start with the church and your views on it.

Domain	Main questions	Prompts	Issues covered
Church	How long have you attended [this] church? Why do you attend church? What do you get out of it? How do you see your role in the church? What is the role of ordinary people	Friends/belonging/support/spiritual comfort/purpose/community What do you participate in? Why? Involvement/	Background Motivation Experience Involvement Participation of laity

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	in this church? Are there any times in your life when belonging to church has been particularly important?	e.g. as opposed to role of clergy? How can churches involve non-clergy better?	Place of church in community
	Have there been times when you have consciously left church?	What were the reasons for leaving? What brought you back?	Alienation from/return to church
	What can the church do to become a more welcoming place?	What is the church's mission?	Role of church in community
Worship	How important is the Liturgy [i.e the form of worship in the prayer book, MP, EP] to your worship?	Structure of service/freedom in worship/variety/security in form	Form of worship
		What is your opinion of the Eucharist? What is your view of the frequency of Morning/Evening Prayer and Eucharist services here in this church? What is the balance?	Sacrament
	How important for you is music in worship?	What kind of music helps you in worship? (traditional hymns, modern choruses, sung MP or Eucharist?)	Music in worship
		Do you have a favourite hymn? Are there any hymns which have informed/strengthened/influenced your beliefs? Is it the words or the music or a combination of both which has aided this?	

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	Can you recall a favourite sermon?	What was it about the sermon which made it memorable? What is effective in sermons which affects your life or sticks with you?	Sermon Teaching/learning/remembering/Application
Bible	How do you view the Bible? How regularly do you read the Bible? How do you read it? What difference does it make to your life? What other books have you read to help you? Christian or non-christian.	Good book/book of teachings/the inspired Word of God/ e.g. open at random, a few verses before bed. Where is Bible kept? Read alone? With others? Do you follow the daily Almanac? Do you have any special passages/Books and why? How important is it?	Origin of Scripture/relevance/place of S in life of believer Christian practice
Prayer	Do you pray? How often, e.g.? How do you pray? Is prayer effective, from your experience?	Do you find prayer easy? Liturgy prayers/spontaneously/MP+EP/groups/alone/out loud Examples of answered prayer/unanswered prayer – feelings and practice as a result	Christian practice Practice based on beliefs/experience

Appendix D

Beliefs (based on the Apostles' Creed)	How do you think the world/universe was created?		Creation vs. evolution
OMITTED IN MAIN INTERVIEWS	What do you believe about Jesus? /Who do you say Jesus is?	Virgin birth/God incarnate/sinless/eternal/of the same substance as the Father/good man/teacher/prophet among many	Deity of Christ Trinity
	Why did He die?/What does Jesus' death mean to you?	Forgiveness/peace/reconciliation with God Sins atoned for/propitiation	Atonement/Salvation
	Is it possible to have a personal relationship with Him?	Salvation? Are you saved?	Personal relationship with Jesus/personal Salvation
	Do you believe in evil? Do you believe that the Devil exists?	Where does evil come from? Within/without?	Evil/Satan Sin
	What is sin?	Are humans born in sin?	Injustice/good and evil
	What about bad things that happen to good people?		
	How do you view the Holy Spirit?	Force/person of the Trinity/conscience	Holy Spirit/Trinity
	What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian?	Indwelling	
	Do you believe in the Resurrection?		Resurrection
	How do you view life after death?	Do we all go to Heaven?	Second coming Final judgment
	How do you view the phrase – thence He will come to judge the living and the dead?	Is Jesus returning? How do you view that event?	
	Do you belief in a literal place call Hell?	What about those who do not know Jesus? Other religions?	
Sacraments	What is Baptism and what does it do? Why must we perform it?	Cleansing/nice ceremony/to prevent babies from going to Hell/covenant/new	Baptism

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		birth/superstition Memorial/re-enactment/literal transubstantiation What did it signify? Relation to Baptism?	Eucharist Confirmation
	What happens at the Lord's Supper / Holy Communion / Breaking of bread, etc.? How important was Confirmation to you?		
Christian life	What does 'being a Christian' mean to you? How does someone 'become' a Christian? How do you demonstrate your beliefs/Christianity in your everyday life? If others were asked about your faith (say, those who are not in the church), what might they say about you?	Salvation/good living/purpose/rightness before God Salvation/growing up in Christian family/conversion	Practical application Spiritual insight
Origin/development of faith	You have told me a lot about what you believe. Where did you get these beliefs? Can you think of a time when you did not believe? What was it that changed your mind/heart/experience? Can faith be learned? What do you do to develop your	Home/family/friends/important significant other people/Bible/books/school/Sunday school/hymns Life events/mission/maturity/friends etc. or is it something we are born with? Reading Bible/prayer/fellowship/tapes other	Personal Christian history Conversion Teaching/learning/acquisition Theological/religious education

Appendix D

	faith? Is it important to 'move on' in faith? What have been the most important influences in your Christian or church experience?	media (of sermons etc.)/Christian music/meditation/formal teaching. Hymns/people/church/vicar/sermons/special services etc.	Progression/maturation Factors in faith

Well, you have told me a great deal about your faith, Church etc. and you must be exhausted. It has been a privilege talking with you and you have given me a great deal to think about, about your faith and about my own Christian development. What you have told me is very important to you and I will make every effort to stay as true to the meaning of what you said. With your permission if, when I listen to this again, there are some things I need to clarify, may I come back to you with specific questions? I promise these will be much less intense than what we have been talking about today; I do not want to misinterpret anything or put my own interpretation on what you have said. I again emphasise the confidentiality of the material. Thank you very much indeed for taking this time and for engaging in such a fascinating enlightening discussion.

Appendix D

APPENDIX E

Summary of Interviews

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Appendix E

Interviews

In order to provide a broader view of the content of the individual interviews, the data presented below outline a summary of each interview. These represent the perception of the interviewer following listening to the recorded interview and reading the transcripts several times but also coloured by the researcher's experience of dealing with the individuals in the context of placements in the churches over a period of two years. The features identified may or may not be further explored in the course of the detailed analysis.

<u>F1</u>

This participant had moved to Wales nine years ago and attended the local church, following a period of sitting in the Welsh chapel which was closer, but she understood no Welsh. She has long experience of church in England and was heavily involved in various aspects of that church. In the current church (B), although holding no formal office, she is one of the main people who is involved in everything from organising fund-raising and social events, to cleaning the church and acting as informal adviser to wardens and vicars. Participant F1 is very well read and has experience of various denominations. Music is very important to her in worship and she was able to sing favourite hymns which had been important to her in her spiritual journey. She has some strong views on the new prayer books which are used and prefers the language of the older versions. She enjoys reading Scripture and has grappled with some texts which have puzzled her, sometimes taking the side of the under-dog in Scripture. Similarly she is able to recall sermons which have had an impact on her or in which she has had some searching questions which she will take to the minister following

the sermon. The importance of baptism as the beginning of the journey is felt keenly and she is critical of ministers who refuse to baptise children because their parents do not attend the church. She expresses some strong views on the rise of Islam in Great Britain. She considers Christianity and the church as under siege and is keen to find ways of encouraging others to come to church. Experience in her previous church with Alpha is one way which she considers a possibility. She has a strong faith which is evidenced both in her practices and also in her actions in the community.

F2

A warden in church B, this participants has been a relatively recent returner to church, following the death of her husband. She is very active in the services, taking intercessions, doing readings and organising various events; some of the recent challenges to her position as warden in managing change have had an impact on her. She practises her beliefs in the workplace where she often encounters challenges to her faith when faced with moral dilemmas. She sees works as an important demonstration of faith. She is developing the habit of Bible reading and can recall significant passages for her life and also sermons which have meant something to her. At one stage in her life she had a spiritual experience which has had a lasting effect on her.

F3

This woman has been resident in the village all her life and has been a faithful member and for many years warden of church B where she started attending as a child and went faithfully three times on Sundays. She sees Jesus as her friend and calls on him daily in prayer, especially in times of particular anxiety. Despite her family not

continuing in church, she has remained faithful, also through various life crises. She attributes the problems faced by rural churches to wider changes in society such as television and the busy-ness of life; she is supportive of the church as a provider of community events and as a means to mission but is not convinced that the church is ever going to recuperate the lost ground with the young.

F4/M3

This husband and wife team were interviewed together, although their independent journeys in faith were evident, as were their joint experiences. The wife was brought up in a church school which gave a spiritual foundation to her life which has never left her. The husband, on the other hand, was not involved in church until later in life, influenced by their daughter's church-going. They are both now involved in the local church and see the out-working of their faith as being available to anybody who needs help. In the previous church in England they were heavily involved in a bereavement group and visiting and they see the one-to-one contact as an important factor in encouraging people to come to church. They see baptism and confirmation as important steps in the journey of faith and F4 prays regularly with what she called the occasional 'God-bother', where she is angry with God. They are both very active in the church but would like more prominence to be given to the procession of the cross before and after the service, something of which they had experience in their previous church. They read the Bible and benefit from the study groups because they can learn from the views of others and raise questions on difficult passages. They showed sensitivity to the suffering of others and put their own worries in perspective when confronted by the long-term difficulties faced by children in particular.

F5

This participant had an initial introduction to the church as a child but drifted away, to return years later following the death of her husband. An English woman, she experienced initial resentment in the congregation but persevered and is now an active member in the Ladies' Guild and in organising and supporting other events. This experience has given her an appreciation of the difficulties newcomers may face on entering a church, particularly unfamiliarity with the routine and the liturgy. She considers that the church has a role in outreach but that the demands of society prevent people from committing to regular church attendance. This interviewee had a particular love of the Eucharist and regarded it as the most special aspect of the church service.

F6

The interview with this individual revealed less in common with many of the others. The person has travelled widely and has experiences of the faith, Christianity and the church which would be beyond the articulated experiences of many within the church. She has a very vibrant faith, influenced by Mother Theresa and St Therese of Avila. She has had visions of Jesus, experienced speaking in tongues, being filled with the Holy Spirit, dancing in church. On the other hand, she mentions the need to adapt to the church context in which one finds oneself and is currently organist in church C. She says she has always known God but is able to point to various stages on the way of faith through which she has passed. At the heart of her faith is love for Jesus and her obedience in following him has taken her to various places to perform various tasks. She is a scholar and prays and reads Scripture regularly.

F7

This woman who is originally from a Baptist background attends church A where she is a Sunday school teacher. She felt initial hostility when she attended the church but is now an active participant in various ways. She notes the need for a greater focus on the family in worship and suggests that, encouraging the children to participate, can encourage the parents to attend. There is a focus on the interview on forgiveness, especially the difficulty experienced in having to forgive the unforgivable.

F8

As the oldest member of the group, this participant has witnessed many changes in the local rural church where she has been an active member for most of her life. She experienced the closure of a neighbouring church where she and her family had been asked to be involved. She was warden for over 30 years and sees the importance of work to demonstrate faith. She laments the passing of the respect shown to vicars and their important status in society. She looks for the revival for which her late husband longed and worked. She questioned forgiveness. There was a sense in which this person had seen so much that she had a pragmatic view to church and faith. There were interesting questions raised about the status of the Welsh language in worship, especially in a church where the membership is divided.

F9

This woman presented a more global picture of the church and of faith and saw social action as a neglected function of the contemporary church. She had experience of another religion from her immediate family and was able to reflect on this from a personal point of view. She has attended the local church since moving to the area

but seems to be a lone Christian in her family. She sees the most important aspect of faith as love and seeks to demonstrate this love in her actions towards others.

F10

This was another example of a woman who had lived in the local community all of her life and for whom church-going and faith were an indivisible part. There were some difficult family circumstances which had influenced her faith and strengthened it. She lamented the changes in society which she regarded as the cause of the demise of the church and was at a loss to suggest ways of strengthening the church's mission to the local community.

M1

A warden in church B, this man had been part of the church since childhood but had turned his back on it following a family tragedy. He was encouraged to re-join by a former warden and he has been totally committed every since. There are some family issues which continue to influence him but he is a very instrumental force in the church, particularly in getting things done and in organising fund-raising activities. He refutes the claim that his focus on the building is worshipping the building but sees it as a necessary focus for worship within the community. In the interview there are various parts of the narrative where his rural environment are taken as examples of aspects of the faith or which influence his way of looking at the Christian life and God's direction of his life. He sees action as part of faith and will do anything to help those in the community; he gives several examples of his selfless contribution particularly to the elderly in the community but he sees this for the glory of God

rather than for any self praise. He is mentioned in the interviews with others as the main driving force behind much of the work of church B.

M2

This man came to the area some years ago and has been attending the church for over 15 years but had the origin of his faith from Sunday school and then sporadic attendance from school through University; he was encouraged to attend this church by the visit to the house by a former warden. He sees the support network of the Church and regards the community spirit encouraged by the members as very important, although he still thinks there is a need for worship in the church building. He has strong views about the liturgy and is critical of the move towards more contemporary language in the current books used. He also had some difficulty with the bilingual nature of the services. He is very active in practical aspects of the church. He values sermons which focus on current affairs and thinks that government does not see the value of attending church or chapel. Most important for him is the sense of belonging to the community.

The sections above are designed to give a flavour of each interview, all of which were unique and organic.

APPENDIX F

Analysis of Interviews

Ordinary theology

Analysis of interview data

Final version

Domain	Level 2 domain	Level 3 domain	Code
Church	as building	presence	C1
		fund-raising (for bdg)	C1b
	as institution	as dying institution	C2a
		in need of change	C2b
	as people	support network	C3a
		role of ordinary people	C3b
		ageing population	C3c
	and society	faithfulness	C4
	role of church	times away from	C5
	personal history in attending	feeling in attending	C6a
		habit	C6b
	reason for attending	belonging	C7a
		contributing	C7b
		well-being, comfort	C7c
	role IN church		C8
	versus Welsh Chapels		C9
	Sunday school		C10a
	Other church groups		C10b
	Time away from church/prior to coming		C11a
	returning TO church		C11b
	Denominations		C12
	Flowers in		C13
	Finance of		C14
	Visiting other churches		C15
	Church committees (e.g. PCC)		C16
Rural dimension	size of church		R1
	rural society		R2
	pressures on village life		R3
Vicar	in church		V1
	in individual lives		V2
	in society		V3
Warden	role of	in general	A1a
		difficulties in the role	A1b
Faith	as relationship (with God/Jesus)		F1a
		forgiveness	F1b
		sacrifice	F1c
		assurance	F1d
		love	F1e
		obedience	F1f
	as experience	life experience	F2a
		spiritual experience	F2b
		highlights of	F2c

	and works		F3
	and liturgy		F4a
	and music		F4b
	in nature/in the country	positive	F5
	and family	influence/examples	F6a
		contrasting family exps	
	as binding force		F7
	origin of faith		F8
	journey of faith		F9
	and life	in society	F10a
		cares of this life	F10b
		profession	F10c
		Chaplaincies	
	times away from faith		F11
	life and death issues		F12
	and action		F13a
			F13b
		fear of acting in faith	
Worship	in church	in general	W1a
		individual participation	W1b
		choir	W1c
	privately	general	W2a
	and music	hymns	W2b
		media (e.g. Songs of Praise)	W2c
	and liturgy		W3a
		pattern of worship	W3b
		structure of worship	W3c
		prayer book	W3d
	Welsh language and worship	language and worship	W4
	special services		W5a
		Christmas	W5b
		Harvest	W5c
		All Saints'	W5d
		Easter	
Prayer	in church		P1
	privately		P2
		answered prayer	P2b
	corporate		P3
	as child		P4
	in family		P5
Bible	in church		B1
	privately		B2
	using reading-aids		B2b
	special groups (Bible study)		B3
	memorable Scriptures		B4
	language of Bible		B5
	personal reaction to Bible		B6

	stories		
Sermons/talks	role of memorable	examples of qualities of	T1 T2a T2b
Sacraments/rituals	Baptism Confirmation Eucharist Death/burial Creeds Marriage Atonement Other rituals in service	beginning of journey parents' choice controversies surrounding distinguishing marks of views on importance of age of what happens at feelings about funerals	S1a S1b S1c S1d S1e S2a S2b S3a S3b S4 S5 S6 S7 S8
Christian Education	own personal reading nowadays role of church in in schools church schools	influence of others special courses retreats	E1a E1b E2 E3a E3b E4a E4b
Mission	role of church in outreach special events age related considerations groups in church		M1 M2 M3 M4
Other faiths	attitude towards role in experience		O1 02
Narrative features	symbolism metaphor analogy sub-narratives		N1 N2 N3 N4