Achieving sustainable growth in the Diocese of Canterbury: A Shorter Report

John Walker
ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE GROWTH IN THE DIOCESE OF CANTERBURY

John Walker

A shorter report for the Diocese of Canterbury

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## CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION: The need for sustainable growth

1. DATA OF DECLINE... AND GROWTH
   - Attendance decline...and some exceptions
   - Attendance by the non-churched
   - Attendance by the non-churched at fresh expressions
   - Patterns of current attendance
   - Trends over time
   - Implications

2. RESEARCH METHODS
   - Research questions and approaches
   - Sample Composition

3. RESULTS
   - Terminology
   - Quantitative data results
   - Qualitative data results
   - Conclusion

4. DISCUSSION
   - Children
   - The unchurched
   - The Transformative Cycle
   - Ministers
   - Consumerism
   - Fresh expressions

5. CONCLUSION
   - Research outcomes
   - Strategic recommendations
   - Achieving sustainable growth

REFERENCES
INTRODUCTION:
The need for sustainable growth

At least five times... the Faith has to all appearance gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases it was the dog that died (Chesterton 2007: 249).

This research is about helping churches in England recover from decline. For the Christian faith to be threatened by apparent irrelevance in the face of contemporary cultural developments is nothing new, it seems. G.K. Chesterton refers to the challenges represented by Arianism, the Albigensians, Humanist scepticism, Voltaire and Darwin. Each time, he argues, the Church has survived its apparent decay. It has drawn deep on its roots and re-grown, re-shaping itself to meet each challenge, re-invigorated, renewed.

I will argue that the Church in Western Europe, and more specifically the Church in England, faces a new and very real threat to its existence at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If we merely do the same things as we’ve done in the past, all the evidence suggests that the Church will wither and die. But I will also argue that it does not have to be this way and, indeed, there are signs that some parts of the Church here are already drawing deep and re-shaping themselves to meet the contemporary challenge.

My main aim has been to discover the extent to which there are any common factors that underlie sustainable church growth within the specific context of the English Diocese of Canterbury. I have met two kinds of objections to this enquiry. The first asks why I am so fixated with the numbers of ‘bums on seats’ when the real mission of the Church is to do with spiritual growth and serving our local communities; quality rather than quantity should be the true concern. My reply is two-fold. First, each number on a parish return represents a person. Declining numbers mean that an increasing number of people are no longer members of their faith-community. Some may have died or moved away, but others have left, usually gradually. There is a serious pastoral concern, then, for the spiritual well-being both of those who have gone, and also for the church that is no longer able to meet their needs. At the same time, where numbers are rising each number represents a person who has found a
benefit to belonging to a faith-community. We can learn from churches that are able to embody the gospel in a way that constantly draws new people into their congregational life. Second, a depletion of human capital threatens the capacity of congregations to maintain their economic, spiritual, cultural and social capital both in their internal life and in their relation to the wider community. Sustaining the mission of a local church needs a wide variety of people.

The second objection is that such research is mechanistic, and that God gives growth, not strategies and techniques. When churches are truly open to the Holy Spirit, then God will give the growth. My response to this is simple. There are more churches that particularly emphasise the ministry of the Holy Spirit with declining than growing attendances, particularly if they are large. And there are as many growing churches that do not particularly emphasise the ministry of the Holy Spirit as those that do. Neither declining nor growing congregations are particularly associated with any one theological emphasis or liturgical tradition. Rather, growing churches are associated with a number of qualities in the life of the congregation, irrespective of their tradition. Thoughtful consideration about how these qualities might be encouraged in a particular church is no less godly a process than the thoughtful reflection an individual might give to their own practices as a disciple of Christ.

Both of these objections do usefully raise the question of the relationship between theology and practice, however. This research seeks to find out what 'works'; however, not every practice which effectively raises attendance levels may be theologically or morally desirable. In the longer report, therefore, a certain amount of theological reflection accompanies the sociological analysis in the quest to find authentic Christian practices that facilitate sustainable attendance growth. In this shorter report, for the sake of brevity, I present only empirical evidence and the conclusions based on it. In both reports, however, I am offering carefully researched data rather than a theological argument, and the task of further theological reflection will fall to those who wish to make use of it within their particular context.
1 DATA OF DECLINE AND GROWTH

Any plausible account of the possibilities of sustainable church growth in England must grapple honestly with the general context of consistent and chronic Sunday attendance decline.

Attendance decline...and some exceptions

Total church attendance on Sundays in England declined by 42 per cent between 1979 and 2005:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5,441</td>
<td>4,743</td>
<td>3,715</td>
<td>3,166</td>
<td>-42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-15</td>
<td>1,415</td>
<td>1,186</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>602</td>
<td>-57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Brierley 2006: 12.2.1, 12.3.2

Figure 1.1 Total Sunday attendance in England 1979-2005 (in 000’s)

Yet, at 57 per cent, the decline in child Sunday attendance in England over twenty-six years has been even more dramatic.

The Church of England

Usual Sunday attendance

Until the year 2000, the method used in the Church of England for tracking diachronic trends had been usual attendance at Sunday services. Usual Sunday attendance (uSa) is based on parish records of the number of individuals who attend on a ‘normal’ Sunday; that is, excluding special occasions. A comparison with overall attendance in England between 1989 and 2005 shows that
Church attendance patterns

decline in the Church of England has been less acute during this period, and in
the Diocese of Canterbury even less so, but that the general pattern is similar:
chronic general and dramatic child attendance decline:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>England</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>3,557</td>
<td>3,009</td>
<td>2,564</td>
<td>-28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-15</td>
<td>1,186</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>602</td>
<td>-49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4,743</td>
<td>3,715</td>
<td>3,166</td>
<td>-33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C of E</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>921</td>
<td>803</td>
<td>743</td>
<td>-19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-16</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>-42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,156</td>
<td>977</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>-24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Canterbury</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>-15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-16</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>-28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>-17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Brierley 2006: 12.2.1, 12.3.2; Evans 2009

Figure 1.2 Total uSa in England and Church of England 1979-2005 compared (in 000’s)

The latest Church of England data available are provisional statistics for 2010.
However, as uSa data is not available for the year 2000, I will use the final
statistics for 2009 in order to calculate attendance trends over a period of two
decades for the Church of England as a whole. It seems clear that attendance
has been declining at a fairly constant rate during this period and that the
overall rate of child attendance decline has been double that for adults:
Church attendance patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>U-16s</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>921,021</td>
<td>234,519</td>
<td>1,155,540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%▼</td>
<td>-13%</td>
<td>-28%</td>
<td>-16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>799,100</td>
<td>169,700</td>
<td>968,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%▼</td>
<td>-12%</td>
<td>-28%</td>
<td>-15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>704,500</td>
<td>121,600</td>
<td>826,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%▼</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>-24%</td>
<td>-48%</td>
<td>-29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Archbishops’ Council 2011; Evans 2009

Figure 1.3  Church of England uSa 1989-2009

It is not possible to use the 2009 statistics for the Diocese of Canterbury to show trends over two decades, however, because a consideration of recent attendance trends in the diocese indicate that the official public figures for 2009 are likely to be inaccurate:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>U-16s</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>14,600</td>
<td>2,900</td>
<td>17,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%▼</td>
<td>-6.2%</td>
<td>-10.3%</td>
<td>-6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>13,700</td>
<td>2,600</td>
<td>16,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%▼</td>
<td>-11.7%</td>
<td>-11.5%</td>
<td>-11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>12,100</td>
<td>2,300</td>
<td>14,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%▼</td>
<td>+15.7%</td>
<td>+30.4%</td>
<td>+18.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>17,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%▼</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>+17.2%</td>
<td>-0.5%</td>
<td>-2.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Archbishops’ Council 2012, 2011, 2010b; Evans 2009

Figure 1.4  Canterbury Diocese uSa 2007-2010
Church attendance patterns

The Church of England’s Research and Statistics Department attributes this anomaly to the response rate of parishes submitting their parish statistics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Parish response rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Odunsi 2012*

**Figure 1.5**  
Canterbury Diocese Response Rate 2007-2010

As the low response rate for 2009 has almost certainly provided inaccurate attendance data, I will use the 2010 provisional statistics to demonstrate ten-year trends for the last two decades:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>U-16s</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>17,181</td>
<td>4,647</td>
<td>21,828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%▼</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>-7%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>16,600</td>
<td>4,300</td>
<td>20,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%▼</td>
<td>-16%</td>
<td>-30%</td>
<td>-19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>17,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%▼</td>
<td>-19%</td>
<td>-35%</td>
<td>-22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Archbishops’ Council 2011; Evans 2009*

**Figure 1.6**  
Canterbury Diocese uSa 1989-2010

Even using the more favourable 2010 figures, Sunday attendance decline in the Diocese of Canterbury accelerated rapidly during the first decade of the new
Church attendance patterns

millennium. As with national figures, child attendance decline has been double that of adult attendance decline.

Average attendance

At the end of the 1990s, the Research and Statistics Department stopped publishing uSa figures, and failed to collect them entirely in the year 2000. A report by the Statistics Review Group in the year 2000 'concluded that “as a sole measure of church attendance, adult usual Sunday attendance no longer seems appropriate”' (2002: 98). From the year 2000, therefore, a new method of measuring attendance was introduced based on an actual count of people attending on both on Sundays and weekdays during October from which average weekly (aWa) and average Sunday (aSa) attendance figures are calculated. They are also used to calculate high, average and low monthly attendance figures.

At the time, there was a great deal of criticism about this switch of methods because it seemed to ignore the value of trends over time. As a result, uSa was reinstated from 2001 so that a comparison of the two methods of measuring attendance over nine years is now possible:
First, figures for aSa are consistently higher than uSa, suggesting that the different method may inflate attendance figures. Bob Jackson believes that uSa is a 'solid and reliable trend indicator' in which random errors are cancelled out by aggregation (Jackson 2002: 8). He also fears that 'October counts may be more volatile', principally because of the possibility of five Sundays in some years; shifting patterns of both school half-terms and harvest festivals, and unpredictable weather (Jackson 2002: 10). There were four Sundays during October 2001, but five in 2010, which increased the chance of midweek school harvest services inflating these figures and the possibility of those with a low rate of attendance (say every 3-4 weeks) being counted twice rather than once. Therefore, it seems probable that the true rate of decline for aSa over nine years may be slightly higher.

Second, therefore, the similar trends of decline between uSa and aSa over
Church attendance patterns

nine years indicated by a diachronic comparison are likely to be even closer than they already appear. Both show chronic decline in adult Sunday attendance and acute decline in Sunday attendance by children and young people.

Third, a synchronic comparison of aSa and aWa shows that aWa is considerably higher than aSa, a result that justifies to a certain extent the insistence of the statistics department on the importance of midweek attendance, especially as these figures do not include fresh expressions.

Finally, and more importantly, a diachronic comparison of aSa and aWa reveals a markedly different pattern of decline. Although overall adult decline is slightly lower, the decline in the attendance of young people is significantly less, which suggests that adult midweek attendance has grown slightly and midweek attendance by young people has increased significantly. Isolating the average midweek attendance (aMa) figures reveals this to be the case:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>108,000</td>
<td>113,200</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-16s</td>
<td>56,000</td>
<td>79,200</td>
<td>+41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>164,000</td>
<td>192,400</td>
<td>+17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Archbishops’ Council 2012; Evans 2009

Figure 1.8   Church of England aMa 2001-2010

Even moderate adult attendance growth amounts to a reversal of the trends of decline demonstrated on Sundays, but a 41 per cent increase in midweek child attendance is a remarkable reversal of Sunday trends.

An analysis of trends between 2001 and 2010 for the Diocese of Canterbury reveal similar patterns with regard to the different methods of calculating Sunday attendance. However, there is an even more marked contrast between aSa and aWa, showing significantly higher growth in midweek attendance by both adults and children during this nine year period, compared to national trends:
## Church attendance patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>uSa</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>15,700</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>-11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-16s</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>-14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19,200</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>-11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>aSa</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>17,100</td>
<td>15,100</td>
<td>-12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-16s</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>3,800</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21,100</td>
<td>18,900</td>
<td>-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>aWa</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>19,100</td>
<td>21,300</td>
<td>+12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-16s</td>
<td>4,700</td>
<td>5,900</td>
<td>+26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23,800</td>
<td>27,200</td>
<td>+14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>aMa</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>6,200</td>
<td>+210%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-16s</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>2,100</td>
<td>+200%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,700</td>
<td>8,300</td>
<td>+207%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Archbishops’ Council 2012; Evans 2009*

**Figure 1.9  Canterbury Diocese usual and average attendances 2001-2010**

The isolation of different average attendance data for Church of England cathedrals also shows unusually positive trends, for adults as well as children:
Church attendance patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>% change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>aSa</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>15,500</td>
<td>15,800</td>
<td>+2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-16s</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>3,100</td>
<td>+29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17,900</td>
<td>18,900</td>
<td>+6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>aWa</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>21,100</td>
<td>27,400</td>
<td>+30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-16s</td>
<td>5,700</td>
<td>7,600</td>
<td>+33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26,800</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>+31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>aMa</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>5,600</td>
<td>11,600</td>
<td>+107%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-16s</td>
<td>3,300</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>+36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8,900</td>
<td>16,100</td>
<td>+81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Church of England 2011; Evans 2009.

Figure 1.10 Church of England cathedral aSa, aWa & aMa 2001-2010

These data suggest a number of conclusions. First, they suggest that longitudinal data is vital in order to assess trends of growth or decline. Second, it is clear that there are exceptions within a context of general decline. If attendance at cathedrals and parish midweek services is growing, then it seems likely that particular strategies and practices are capable of reversing trends of decline in traditional churches. Third, it is clear that, although midweek parish and cathedral attendance growth has been sufficient to offset Sunday attendance decline in the Diocese of Canterbury, it has not been enough to do so nationally. Average weekly figures still show a net decline in the Church of England as a whole: those ceasing to attend parish churches on a Sunday are not being replaced by cathedral or midweek attenders at the same rate.

Other exceptions to decline

Jackson (2005, 2002) accepts that the general trend in the Church of England
Church attendance patterns

has been one of chronic decline, but finds specific exceptions through comparisons of data from Peter Brierley’s 1989 English church Census and 1998 English church Survey, official Church of England statistics and his own survey of some 600 participating clergy. His general conclusion is that ‘decline is not uniform. It is patchy’ (Jackson 2002: 15).

He demonstrates, for example, that the percentage change in adult uSa in English dioceses between 1989 and 1999 shows wild variation, with sharply differing results in similar or adjacent dioceses:

![Bar chart showing percentage change in adult uSa in different English dioceses between 1989 and 1999]

Source: Jackson 2002:37

Figure 1.11  Adjacent diocesan adult uSa change, 1989-1999
Church attendance patterns

Diocesan uSa figures between 1999 and 2009 show similar variation:

![Bar chart showing percentage change in attendance]

Source: Archbishops’ Council 2012, 2011; Evans 2009

Figure 1.12  Adjacent diocesan adult uSa change, 1999-2009

Jackson also notes the tendency of the percentage change in some dioceses to show significant variation year by year. This tendency can be illustrated by those dioceses that demonstrate a variation of more than ten percentage points between the two decades:

- Rochester -7%
- Canterbury -16%
- Ely -7%
- Norwich -21%

---

\(^1\) I have used the more favourable 2010 figure for the Diocese of Canterbury – the official 2009 figure would have produced a decline of 27 per cent.
Church attendance patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diocese</th>
<th>% change 1989-1999</th>
<th>% change 1999-2009</th>
<th>% point variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Derby</td>
<td>-4.1%</td>
<td>-27.6%</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>-25.6%</td>
<td>-3.5%</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coventry</td>
<td>-1.9%</td>
<td>-19.0%</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradford</td>
<td>-8.3%</td>
<td>-22.6%</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>-20.9%</td>
<td>-6.7%</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truro</td>
<td>-10.0%</td>
<td>-23.1%</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canterbury²</td>
<td>-3.4%</td>
<td>-15.7%</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>+12.0%</td>
<td>+1.3%</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rochester</td>
<td>-16.7%</td>
<td>-6.6%</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Archbishops’ Council 2011; Evans 2009

Figure 1.13 Variation of percentage change in diocesan adult uSa over two decades

The variation both over time and between similar dioceses suggests that demographics are not the main cause of fluctuations in patterns of diocesan decline or growth. Jackson concludes that the main causes of such variation are instead ‘connected with diocesan policies, personnel, ethos, culture, spiritual health, financial resources or corporate performance (2002: 38).

Jackson draws upon Christian Research data for 1989 and 1998 to show that individual church congregations also demonstrate significant variation in patterns of decline and growth (2002: 33). He argues that the large regional differences illustrated by diocesan variation indicate that ‘transfer is not the main reason for the growth’ (Jackson 2002: 35). Again, data that is more recent is now available from Christian Research:

² Again, the more favourable 2010 figure has been used for the Diocese of Canterbury – the official 2009 figure would have produced a 23.7 per cent variation.
Church attendance patterns

Such exceptions lead Jackson to conclude that 'internal features of the Church are at least as important as the external features of society in determining growth and decline' (2002: 41). These examples, along with the growth in cathedral and midweek child attendance, certainly indicate that patterns of decline are not uniform. They also raise the possibility that the causes of decline include organizational factors and that strategic interventions may therefore be able to stem or even reverse trends of decline.

Attendance by the non-churched

A strong argument is made in Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context (Archbishops’ Council 2009) that the non-churched should be the main mission focus of fresh expressions. The report argues that the traditional approach to mission in the Church of
Church attendance patterns

England largely relies on ‘a “returners” strategy – that young people will one day come back to church’ (Archbishops’ Council 2009: 40). However, it says that there is both a decreasing number of those with a church experience to return to and a growing proportion of those who have never had contact with a church. It concludes, therefore, that if mission strategy does not change, the church will eventually die.

Mission-shaped Church makes this argument by presenting data from Christian Research illustrating the collapse of Sunday school attendance from 55 per cent of the UK population in 1900 to 4 per cent in the year 2000. It then attempts to demonstrate the large proportion of those who have had no contact with churches by summarizing the findings of Philip Richter and Leslie Francis (1998).

The report maintains that Richter & Francis’ research demonstrates the following church attendance patterns in England in October 1996 (excluding those ‘of other world faiths and traditions’):

- Regular church attenders: 10 per cent
- Fringe attenders: 10 per cent
- Open de-churched: 20 per cent
- Closed de-churched: 20 per cent
- Non-churched: 40 per cent


Mission-shaped Church defines ‘regular attenders’ as those who attend between five and eight times in a two month period. ‘Fringe attenders’ are those who attend between one and three times in a two month period. The ‘de-churched’ are those who have attended church ‘at some point in their life’ and are either ‘open’ or ‘closed’ to the idea of returning. The ‘non-churched’ are those who ‘have never been to church except perhaps for the funeral or wedding of a friend or relation’ (Archbishops’ Council 2009: 37). It claims that these are national averages, and that, with regard to the non-churched, ‘in urban areas this figure might be as high as 80 per cent of the total’ (Archbishops’ Council 2009: 38).

Unfortunately, there are significant inaccuracies in this summary. In the full report, I give a detailed analysis of the errors Mission-shaped Church makes in
Church attendance patterns

interpreting Richter & Francis’ research; here, I will summarise my conclusions:

- The rough proportions of non-churched, open de-churched and closed de-churched in the report are reasonable extrapolations, although it is worth noting that Richter & Francis never used this terminology.
- Richter & Francis make no distinction between ‘regular’ and ‘fringe’ attenders and it is unclear upon what basis the report makes it.
- These are not national averages. Nor can these figures be taken to apply nationally, in that the sample location excluded rural areas and much of suburban Greater London.
- It is unlikely that the proportion of urban non-churched will be higher than this ‘national average’ – as much as 80 per cent. The London postal areas from which samples were taken are not synonymous with Greater London and are themselves largely urban. It is unclear where this figure of 80 per cent has come from; it is certainly not Richter & Francis.
- The claim that ‘40 per cent of the population nationally have never been to church’ except for weddings and funerals (Archbishops’ Council 2009: 37) is inaccurate. Rather, Richter & Francis found that 38 per cent of their urban telephone survey had attended church less than six times a year and, as that total excludes Christmas and Easter attendance, it could have been as many as seven times a year. The proportion the report identifies as ‘non-churched’ therefore includes occasional churchgoers.

It is greatly to be regretted that this analysis of the proportion of those in England with no churchgoing background is so flawed, and that this potentially inaccurate picture of attendance patterns has been perpetuated in the second edition of Mission-shaped Church. The argument it seeks to illustrate seems both plausible and, if correct, vitally important. If the Church of England’s traditional mission strategy is failing then it may be that the new approach offered by fresh expressions might prove substantially more effective at attracting the ‘non-churched’. Given this possibility, a more recent piece of research by the organization Tearfund (Ashworth & Farthing 2007),
Church attendance patterns

which attempts to create a ‘segmentation model’ similar to that described in *Mission-shaped Church* (Archbishops’ Council 2009: 36-38), may be highly significant.

*Churchgoing in the UK* (Ashworth & Farthing 2007), commissioned and published by the Christian relief and development agency *Tearfund*, appears to be a rigorous and comprehensive piece of research. Random Location Sampling was carried out over a three-and-a-half week period in at least 139 separate locations across the UK by a professional market research company. A balanced sample of 7,000 adult respondents were interviewed in their own homes using a face-to-face omnibus survey, the results of which were weighted to correct any minor imbalances in the sample profile (Ashworth & Farthing 2007: 40).

In order to create its ‘segmentation model’, ‘the *Tearfund* research asked all adults except those of other religions their frequency of church attendance. Current churchgoers were classified as:

- **Regular:** ‘at least monthly’
- **Fringe:** ‘at least six times a year’
- **Occasional:** ‘at least annually’

(Ashworth & Farthing 2007: 5-6).

‘People who had not attended church in the last year were categorised according to their past and anticipated future attendance at church’:

- **De-churched:** had ‘been to church in the past’
- **Non-churched:** had ‘never attended church, apart from weddings, baptisms or funerals’
- **Open:** were ‘fairly/very likely to go to church in the future’
- **Closed:** were ‘unlikely/not at all likely to go to church in the future’

(Ashworth & Farthing 2007: 5).

‘Those who did not answer the question on prior church attendance’ were categorized as:

- **Unassigned**
Church attendance patterns


Although the survey was UK-wide there is a detailed report of responses by country so that figures for England can be isolated, still using a significant weighted base of 5,774 respondents:

![Attendance Pattern Pie Chart]

Source: Ashworth & Farthing 2007: 31

Figure 1.15  Tearfund: Attendance patterns in England in 2006

However, by removing the ‘other religions’ and ‘unassigned’ categories, and conflating the ‘Occasional/Open de-churched’ and ‘Open/Closed non-churched’ categories, it is possible to present Ashworth & Farthing’s findings with exactly the same categories as in Mission-shaped Church, using a weighted base of 5,213:
Church attendance patterns

Source: Ashworth & Farthing 2007: 31

Figure 1.16 Tearfund: Attendance patterns in England in 2006; revised categories

These results can then be directly compared with findings presented in Mission-shaped Church:
Church attendance patterns

Only the ‘non-churched’ category is similar although, intriguingly, the broader categories of churchgoers, the lapsed and those with no churchgoing background are almost identical. Perhaps Richter & Francis’ results, loosely interpreted though they were in Mission-shaped Church, reflected their rough proportions accurately.

What is clear from the Tearfund research, which was not plausibly established by the model in Mission-shaped Church, is that the proportion of adults in England with no prior churchgoing background is a very large minority. What is not clear from either report, however, is the extent to which this proportion may be growing over time. That it is growing seems likely. Richter & Francis’ sample, upon which Mission-shaped Church’s ‘non-churched’ category was based, included occasional churchgoers. Therefore, the actual proportion of those with no prior churchgoing experience was likely to have been significantly lower than 40 per cent, and the Tearfund figure of 38 per cent seems...
Church attendance patterns

likely to represent an increase. Without clear longitudinal evidence, however, this cannot be known for certain. What is also not clear from this research is the relationship of child attendance decline to any increase in the numbers of the non-churched. However, if the collapse of child church attendance means that adults with a churchgoing background will become increasingly rare, then the long-term significance of fresh expressions will reside in their ability to attract the non-churched.

Attendance by the non-churched at fresh expressions

A study by Matt Stone (2010) is the only example I have found within fresh expressions literature of research that attempts to address this question using quantitative and qualitative data. Six fresh expressions, mainly in Cambridgeshire, were visited during March and April 2009 and those attending were asked to complete questionnaires that ‘provided some quantitative overview statistics of who attends each fresh expression and some qualitative indication of why they attend’ (Stone 2010: 4). Although Stone describes the motivational responses as ‘qualitative’, in reality he is able to use them only quantitatively by reporting the incidence of each type of response. Interviews were conducted only with the leaders of each fresh expression so that, while Stone is able to describe leaders’ perceptions and behaviour in some depth, he is unable to describe from qualitative data any processes underlying the perceptions and behaviour of those who attend these fresh expressions.

The qualitative results show that the common perception among the leaders was that the ‘unchurched stay away from church’ because traditional churches do not consider or understand ‘how the unchurched think’, unlike their own fresh expressions (Stone 2010: 10). On the basis of such opinions, and the approval expressed by the few with no prior churchgoing experience for the fresh expressions at which they attend, Stone concludes that ‘it was evident that the traditional church is failing the unchurched’ (Stone 2010: 11). Nevertheless, the intentions of these leaders about the purpose of their fresh expression were themselves somewhat ambiguous. While all expressed a desire to attract those not presently attending a church, only one mentioned ‘people who are unchurched’ and four described their fresh expressions as providing for existing churchgoers in some way (Stone 2010: 18-19).
Church attendance patterns

However, the quantitative results with regard to the non-churched were quite clear: ‘only five of the ninety-two respondents (5.4 per cent) said that they had not attended another church previously’ (Stone 2010: 22).

Stone further attempts to categorize the respondents by their churchgoing behaviour before attending their fresh expression:

- Regular churchgoers: sixty-six respondents had continued to attend a previous church in addition to a fresh expression.
- Churchgoers or dechurched: sixteen respondents either had transferred from another church or had attended one in the past. He was unable to differentiate between these respondents.
- Dechurched: five respondents had lapsed from past church attendance.
- Unchurched: five respondents had never attended a church.

The constituency of Stone’s sample are very different from the general attendance patterns in England suggested by the Tearfund research:
**Figure 1.18  Prior attendance patterns among fresh expressions attenders**

These are not encouraging results. These fresh expressions were not showing success at one of their most fundamental theoretical goals. Whether such a low incidence of church attendance by those with no prior churchgoing experience is typical of churchgoers generally will be examined next.

**Patterns of current attendance**

While the *Tearfund* survey of 2006 (Ashworth & Farthing 2007) provides a useful snapshot of the proportion of those who have never been to church apart from weddings, baptisms or funerals, it is not possible to use it to demonstrate trends over time. The only surveys that ask about both past and present church attendance in Great Britain are the British Social Attitudes (BSA) and the European Values Study (EVS) surveys. These both asked comparable questions about the respondents’:
Church attendance patterns

1. Age.
2. Frequency of attendance at religious services apart from special occasions like weddings, funerals and baptisms.
3. Frequency of attendance at religious services at eleven or twelve years of age.

First, percentages of churchgoers with a child churchgoing background were calculated from the combined data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BSA 1998 + EVS 1999 (n=680)</th>
<th>BSA 2008 + EVS 2008 (n=1200)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All churchgoers attending at least occasionally age 11-12</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All churchgoers never attending age 11-12</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = Number (sample size)


Figure 1.19  Child churchgoing as a predictor of adult churchgoing in Britain

The results suggest:

- That any (even occasional) attendance as a child of eleven or twelve is a significant factor for later adult churchgoing.
- The relative inability of traditional churches to be able to attract those adults who did not attend church services at the age of around eleven or twelve.
- That, as those who may have attended church as younger children or as teenagers are not represented here, these figures are likely to be an under-estimate of the correlation between a childhood experience of church and later adult churchgoing.

It is quite clear, then, that the argument in Mission-shaped Church that churches have traditionally recruited adult attenders from those who already have a prior experience of church as children is largely correct. These figures
also suggest that churches provide a culture within which Christian faith is nurtured and sustained, and to which children can return later in life. Given this, the continuing fall in child attendance makes it imperative to establish as accurately as possible the size and rate of growth of the proportion of British adults who have had no experience of church as children, however occasionally.

Second, the interrelation between present and past attendance patterns were calculated in four categories:

1. **Regular**: at least once a month
2. **Occasional**: less than once a month
3. **Lapsed**: non-attending but had attended as a child at least occasionally
4. **Unchurched**: non-attending either now or as a child aged eleven or twelve:

This combination can then be compared with the model offered by Mission-shaped Church:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lapsed</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchurched</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = Number (sample size)


**Figure 1.20** UK current and past attendance patterns: Mission-shaped Church and BSA/EVS surveys compared

It is clear that in the late 1990s the proportion of the unchurched was much smaller, and the proportion of church attenders much larger, than that estimated by Mission-shaped Church:
Church attendance patterns

Figure 1.21  Mission-shaped Church: current and past attendance patterns in England in 1996

Source: Archbishops’ Council 2009: 37

Figure 1.22  BSA 1998 + EVS 1999/2000: GB current and past attendance patterns

Source: EVS 2006; Social and Community Planning Research 2000
Church attendance patterns

The proportion of lapsed churchgoers was, co-incidentally, more accurate. These data suggest that the Church had more time to develop its mission to the unchurched than was assumed in Mission-shaped Church. Whether it still does so, however, depends upon the rate of growth in the proportion of the unchurched nationally.

Trends over time

An analysis of the changes between the surveys over ten years suggests that, over time, churchgoers are attending less frequently and that, when they die, both churchgoers and the lapsed are being replaced by non-attenders with no child churchgoing experience:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BSA 1998 + EVS 1999 n=1673</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>BSA 2008 + EVS 2008 n=3529</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>-12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lapsed</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchurched</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>+19%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = Number (sample size)

Figure 1.23 GB current and past attendance patterns over ten years

An analysis in seven age categories demonstrates this shift in the proportion of the unchurched in more detail:
There is a clear and consistent trend of growth in the proportion of the unchurched over time, both between age groups in the same year and between the same age group over ten years.

An accurate projection of the growth in the proportion of the unchurched into the future could be made by applying the impact of decreasing child churchgoing demonstrated by Brierley’s church surveys upon developing patterns of adult church attendance to the combined results of the BSA and EVS surveys of 2008. Complete details of the calculation is provided in the Full Report. The resulting projection can be taken as an accurate estimate up to 2025 because it is based on known rates of child attendance decline as a proportion of under-fifteens in the population of England, and it seems reasonable to assume that the rates of decline in the rest of Great Britain will have been similar. It assumes that the churchgoing habits of each age cohort will not change over time. However, since it is known that religious affiliation remains constant within age cohorts over time (Voas & Crockett 2005) and, as present rates of death, lapse and churchgoing by those with no childhood church experience are built into the changes in attendance between cohorts, this assumption seems warranted. Projection after 2025 is less certain because rates of child attendance decline are themselves estimated.
Church attendance patterns

The projection demonstrates the likely decline of churchgoers and the lapsed as a proportion of the British population over fifty years, and the commensurate growth in the proportion of the unchurched:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>n=3259</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2030</th>
<th>2040</th>
<th>2050</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lapsed</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchurched</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = Number (sample size)
Source: EVS 2010; National Centre for Social Research 2010

Figure 1.25  GB current and past attendance patterns 2010-2050: BSA and EVS 2008 combined

These data are also capable of projecting results for specific age groups in any given year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>n=3259</th>
<th>18-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45-54</th>
<th>55-64</th>
<th>65-74</th>
<th>75+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lapsed</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchurched</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = Number (sample size)
Source: EVS 2010; National Centre for Social Research 2010

Figure 1.26  GB current and past attendance patterns 2010 by age: BSA and EVS 2008 combined

There is a clear decrease in the proportion of churchgoers and the lapsed, and a clear rise in the proportion of the unchurched, with age. The extraordinary rise between the 25-34 age group and the 18-24 age group reflects the sharp decline in child churchgoing that Brierley found between 1989 and 1998, and
Church attendance patterns

which was already clear in the results from the 2008 surveys. By 2050, these patterns are likely to have continued to the point at which the very high proportion of the unchurched in the younger cohorts will ensure the continuation or even acceleration of these trends beyond 2050:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>n=3259</th>
<th>18-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45-54</th>
<th>55-64</th>
<th>65-74</th>
<th>75+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lapsed</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchurched</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = Number (sample size)
Source: EVS 2010; National Centre for Social Research 2010

Figure 1.27 GB current and past attendance patterns 2050 by age: BSA and EVS 2008 combined

Implications

This projection is based on the premise that the Church continues to fail to recruit churchgoers from those with no churchgoing experience as children, and that current child attendance continues to diminish. The attendance patterns for 2010 suggest that current patterns of churchgoing continue to offer a reasonably high percentage of the Church's traditional recruiting ground, the lapsed:
Traditional approaches to church growth remain relevant, then, while there are still significant numbers with a child churchgoing background. Yet, if present trends continue, the pool of those with childhood church experience will diminish while the proportion of the unchurched in Britain will grow rapidly. As both churchgoers and the lapsed become proportionately more elderly over time, the Church’s mission is likely to become increasingly difficult to resource and to produce ever-decreasing returns. The picture by 2050 will be, at best, one in which the Church experiences severe regression with an ever-decreasing possibility of reversal:
Church attendance patterns

Therefore, the argument by fresh expressions literature for an urgent mission strategy to be developed which successfully attracts the unchurched certainly has force. However, the little evidence there is suggests that fresh expressions may not be any more successful in this regard than traditional churches (Stone 2010). Yet attracting the unchurched is not the only strategy with the capacity to reverse these trends. If child church attendance were to rise, the Church's traditional mission strategies would continue to be effective. The steady rise in Church of England midweek child attendance since 2001 may therefore be a highly significant development:
### Church attendance patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>aSa</th>
<th>aWa</th>
<th>aMa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>173,000</td>
<td>229,000</td>
<td>56,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▼</td>
<td>-35%</td>
<td>-0.4%</td>
<td>+8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>167,000</td>
<td>228,000</td>
<td>61,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▼</td>
<td>-1.8%</td>
<td>+0.9%</td>
<td>+8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>164,000</td>
<td>230,000</td>
<td>66,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▼</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>+2.2%</td>
<td>+7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>164,000</td>
<td>235,000</td>
<td>71,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▼</td>
<td>-3.7%</td>
<td>-1.3%</td>
<td>+4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>158,000</td>
<td>232,000</td>
<td>74,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▼</td>
<td>-1.4%</td>
<td>-1.7%</td>
<td>-2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>155,000</td>
<td>228,100</td>
<td>73,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▼</td>
<td>-4.3%</td>
<td>-4.0%</td>
<td>-3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>148,300</td>
<td>218,900</td>
<td>70,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▼</td>
<td>-0.3%</td>
<td>+2.9%</td>
<td>+9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>147,800</td>
<td>225,300</td>
<td>77,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▼</td>
<td>-2.8%</td>
<td>-1.1%</td>
<td>+2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>143,700</td>
<td>222,900</td>
<td>79,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| ▼   | Overall | -16.9% | -2.7%  | +41.4% |

*Source: Archbishops’ Council 2011; Evans 2009*

**Figure 1.30 Church of England u-16 aWa and aMa 2001-2009**

While the overall trend of midweek child attendance growth has not been sufficient to offset the overall trend of Sunday child attendance decline, the years 2003, 2004 and 2008 are notable in that, in those years, midweek child attendance growth pushed weekly child attendance into overall growth. The strategies that produced this change are clearly having some effect and, if they were able to produce such growth consistently, it is possible that general trends of decline will begin to be reversed.
Church attendance patterns

Furthermore, as these figures do not include fresh expressions, they fail to take into account the many fresh expressions designed to provide for children. *Mission-shaped Church* mentions such fresh expressions, but does not argue for their centrality in reversing trends of decline, preferring to argue for the importance of the unique approach of fresh expressions for attracting the unchurched. However, should fresh expressions for children, such as the ‘messy churches’ often run by existing congregations, begin to fulfil the role played in the past by Sunday schools, they are likely to have a far more profound effect in reversing long-term trends of decline than those fresh expressions currently struggling to attract the unchurched.

Given this, my own research design will attempt not only to compare the relative ability of parish churches and fresh expressions to attract the unchurched, but also their relative effectiveness in attracting children.
RESEARCH METHODS

It seems clear that church attendance growth has hitherto generally depended on a childhood churchgoing experience. The vast majority of churchgoers went to church as children and present strategies are largely not successful at facilitating the integration of the unchurched into congregations. If child churchgoing continues to decline, there will be increasingly few adults whose values and beliefs have been shaped by a Christian community and who have experienced a faith to which they can return. Unless churches can more successfully attract children or the unchurched or both, strategies and qualities associated with growth will have an ever-diminishing effect and further decline will be inevitable.

This is a general picture, however. What is not yet clear is the extent to which individual parish churches that have used growth strategies to reverse decline, or fresh expressions with their innovative approaches, demonstrate trends that vary from the average. Certainly, many fresh expressions aspire to be more successful at attracting children or the unchurched than traditional churches. The key question here is not whether they are more successful than the average traditional church, but whether they are more successful than growing traditional churches and whether either are more successful than the average. If so, there is the supplementary question to consider about whether it is possible to identify which strategies or qualities of church life have enabled the socialization of children and the unchurched into these congregations, and to what extent are they unique to fresh expressions.

Research questions and approaches

Given the complex and interrelated nature of the questions that arise from these themes, a mixed-methods research design seemed to be the most appropriate and effective means of investigating them, with a mixed-methods central research question to address them:
Research methods

To what extent and in what ways do qualitative data arising from fresh expressions and growing parish churches in the Diocese of Canterbury give a comprehensive and nuanced explanation of the processes responsible for any quantitative differences in their ability to attract children or those with no prior churchgoing experience?

This central question was designed to elicit the data necessary to be able to compare the relative effectiveness of a group of fresh expressions and a group of growing parish churches within the Diocese of Canterbury in their ability to attract children and the unchurched, to compare both groups to national norms, and to investigate the processes at the heart of the ability of a faith-community to attract children and the unchurched, irrespective of whether it is a fresh expression or a parish church.

A quantitative hypothesis

The evidence emerging from my data review suggests that ecclesiological or missiological strategies may be able to reverse trends of attendance decline in traditional churches. In addition, evidence from other congregational studies suggests that the conditions of specific local context are also likely to affect these trends. It therefore seems probable that strategic approach or local context, or a combination of the two, will be the independent variable upon which the variable of the incidence of attendance by children and the unchurched depends, irrespective of whether the context is a fresh expression or a parish church.

However, the claim of fresh expressions theory is that fresh expressions are more likely to increase this incidence because of their unique approach to a missional ecclesiology. There is also the possibility that their strategic accommodation with consumerism might have the reverse effect. Both alternatives are contingent upon the possible effects of the fundamental character of fresh expressions as distinct from that of parish churches.

Therefore, in order to test both the claim and the possibility, I took the distinct nature of fresh expressions and parish churches as independent variables and the incidence of attendance by children and the unchurched as
the dependent variable. There have been no prior studies to indicate attendance percentages of children in fresh expressions but, as Stone (2010) found no difference in the attendance percentages of the previously unchurched in fresh expressions from the average indicated by BSA/EVS data, I formulated a null hypothesis for testing by quantitative research:

There is no significant difference between fresh expressions and growing parish churches in terms of the variation from the norm of attendance percentages for children and those with no churchgoing experience at age eleven or twelve.

For the purposes of establishing internal validity, hypothetical terms are defined as follows:

- ‘significant difference’ is taken to be a difference of more than 0.05 variation from the norm;
- ‘fresh expressions’ are six discrete fresh expressions of church in the Diocese of Canterbury, the criteria for the selection of which is established below;
- ‘growing parish churches’ are five parish congregations in the Diocese of Canterbury which have demonstrated consistent growth in adult uSa, child uSa or both, the criteria for the selection of which is established below;
- ‘variation’ is calculated as absolute deviation from the norm;
- ‘the norm’ is set by external measures and is defined differently with regard to children and the unchurched:
  - for children, it is defined as the mean attendance percentage in the Church of England for 2009;
  - for the unchurched, it is defined as the mean attendance percentage among respondents to the combined BSA and EVS surveys of 2008.
- ‘attendance’ is defined differently with regard to children and the unchurched:
  - for children, it is defined as the usual Sunday attendance count provided by ministers;
Research methods

- for the unchurched, it is defined as the either
  - the number of congregational members who completed questionnaires (all churches except FE(Network)), or
  - the number of cell group members (FE(Network));
- ‘attendance percentages’ denotes the incidence of attendance by children, or the unchurched, as a proportion of total attendance;
- ‘children’ are attenders under sixteen years of age;

Given that the sample is representative only of the Diocese of Canterbury, there are no claims to generalize the results beyond the Diocese of Canterbury; the primary purpose of the quantitative testing is to inform the qualitative research, although the results may raise useful questions of wider relevance. Quantitative testing of these hypotheses is useful in that it is capable of revealing any objective differences between the capacity of these fresh expressions and growing parish churches to attract children or to attract the unchurched or, indeed, to attract both groups taken together. A general comparison can be made between the entire sample taken from fresh expressions and the entire sample taken from growing parishes, or comparisons can be made between samples taken from particular fresh expressions and parish churches. The results will form an important component in considering the unique role claimed for fresh expressions. What will not be understood, however, is the role of strategy or local context as mediating variables, especially if a varied pattern emerges, and it is precisely at this point that a mixed-methods approach becomes necessary.

The role of the general fresh expressions approach and that of local context are closely linked. It is the claim of fresh expressions theory that their missional ecclesiology means that the form and function of each church will be uniquely shaped by the highly specific context of a particular locality or social network and that it is this which will enable growth. It remains possible, however, that there may be more general strategic approaches or organizational qualities with which attendance growth is associated, able to be employed in a variety of social contexts by fresh expressions and traditional churches alike. It seems vital to understand, then, not only which strategies have been used by whom, but how they operated, alone or in combination
Research methods

with others; how they were perceived, experienced and responded to; which human processes they mediated; what their outcomes were. Only qualitative research has the capacity to explore this order of question.

Some qualitative questions

Although I am not using a classic grounded theory approach, I wanted to allow the possibility that the qualitative data emerging from a comparative exploration of several particular contexts might be able to shape some ‘well-founded cross-contextual generalities’ about the processes by which parents, children and the unchurched join and belong to faith communities (Mason 2002: 1). My primary qualitative research question therefore became:

What theory might explain the process of starting and continuing to attend fresh expressions or growing parish churches for parents, children and those with no prior churchgoing background?

My qualitative research sub-questions sought to clarify this process:

• How do parents, children and those with no prior churchgoing background describe their decision to begin attending fresh expressions or parish churches?
• How do parents, children and those with no prior churchgoing background describe their decision to continue attending fresh expressions or parish churches?
• To what extent and in what way do parents, children and those with no prior churchgoing background describe an experience of
  o a shift from attending to a sense of belonging?
  o the development of a new identity?
  o a growing sense of significance?
• What is the role of consumer expectations in the participation of parents, children and those with no prior churchgoing background in a fresh expression or parish church?
Research methods

- To what extent are altruism and obligation integral to self-perception by parents, children and those with no prior churchgoing background as members of a faith community or attenders at services or meetings?
- To what extent do participants in fresh expressions and participants in parish churches describe their experiences and perceptions differently?
- How do leaders of fresh expressions or parish churches account for the ability or inability of their faith community to attract parents, children and those with no prior churchgoing background?

Questions of validity and generalization are considered in the context of the results.

Sample Composition

Identifying my samples was a process with various stages. First, I identified those fresh expressions and parish churches that I hoped would form the locations for my research. Next, I interviewed the ministers or leaders to explore their perspective about their faith community: their vision for it, the strategies they employ and their explanation for attendance trends. I also negotiated with them, in their role as 'gatekeepers' of these faith communities, to find participants for a quantitative survey and for qualitative interviews (Boeije 2010, p. 61). All whom I contacted agreed to speak to me, but not all permitted the research to proceed. I visited and observed the services of those who did, and most allowed questionnaires to be distributed to their congregations or members. These both furnished quantitative data and identified candidates for qualitative interview. Initially, three leaders preferred to provide their own quantitative data and arrange candidates for interview themselves, although one did later allow questionnaires to be used.
Research methods

Location

The fresh expressions

There are relatively few fresh expressions within the Diocese of Canterbury beyond the stage of being an experimental outreach strategy by parish churches. The choices for fresh expressions suitable for research were therefore limited. In order for them to be appropriate examples for evaluating fresh expressions theory, I judged that several characteristics were necessary:

- An identity as a faith community, congregation or service that is distinct from any other faith community, congregation or service with which they have links.
- A clearly identifiable leader or leadership team with pastoral and strategic responsibility for their faith community, congregation or service.
- A significant body of people for whom the fresh expression is their primary faith community, congregation or service.

These criteria were important to ensure that they were able to operate as functionally independent alternatives to parish churches, even where they were part of a parish ‘mixed economy’ or financially dependent upon parish churches. In consultation with the Canterbury Diocesan Missioner for Fresh Expressions, I identified six fresh expressions which seemed to fulfil the first two criteria and which probably fitted the third criterion. They were:

- \textit{FE(Network)}: the independent network cell church with an optional Sunday service whose mission focus is those whom parish churches cannot attract.
- \textit{FE(Youth)}: the youth congregation financed by the churches of a deanery whose mission focus is the young people of a town.
- \textit{FE(Messy Church)1}: the distinct service run by an independent fresh expression whose general mission focus is a town but particularly, in this service, parents and children.
- \textit{FE(Messy Church)2}: the distinct service run by an independent fresh expression whose mission focus is the parents and children of a local council estate.
Research methods

- *FE(Café Service)*1: the distinct service with a mission focus on parents and children, run by a parish church.
- *FE(Café Service)*2: the distinct service with a mission focus on socio-economically deprived people with no prior church experience, run by a parish church.

The parish churches

I identified parish churches suitable for my research through parish return data. The Diocese of Canterbury held data in electronic form for years 2002 to 2008. I collated attendance data for these years for both the October count and Usual Sunday Attendance in order to plot attendance trends and identify congregations that have demonstrated steady growth in either adult or child attendance. During this process, I discovered that:

- Of two hundred and ninety parish churches or benefices from which attendance returns should have been made, only 39 per cent had complete attendance data for all six years.
- However, there were 80 per cent for which a five-year trend was possible to calculate to either 2007 or 2008.
- October count data was entirely missing for 2003.
- Close examination of October count data for other years demonstrated sudden, dramatic attendance surges and falls in many parishes, most likely accounted for by Harvest services, which made clear trends impossible to detect.
- Some highly erratic uSa trends were due to data input error from clergy or parish officers. Where adult and child attendance had clearly been transposed, I corrected them; however, where there were two sets of entirely different data for the same parish, I discounted both.

Examining the two hundred and thirty-two parishes for which five-year uSa trends were possible, I found the following patterns of growth and decline:
Research methods

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>Decline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>79 (34%)</td>
<td>16 (7%)</td>
<td>137 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-16</td>
<td>72 (31%)</td>
<td>39 (17%)</td>
<td>121 (52%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.1** Parishes in the Diocese of Canterbury: 5-year uSa trends (A)

Perhaps a more useful distribution, however, would be to indicate the number of parishes which grew or declined by 10 per cent or more:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Growing</th>
<th>Stable</th>
<th>Declining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>60 (26%)</td>
<td>60 (26%)</td>
<td>112 (48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-16</td>
<td>70 (30%)</td>
<td>45 (19%)</td>
<td>117 (51%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.2** Parishes in the Diocese of Canterbury: 5-year uSa trends (B)

The appearance that trends for child attendance may be healthier than that for adults is deceptive. The thirty-nine parishes in which there was no change in child attendance include twenty-two parishes in which no children attended at all. Overall child attendance is very low, so small changes have a more dramatic effect on the trend. For example, seven parishes in which child attendance rose from zero to two over five years show an excellent trend rate that does not reflect healthy growth.

Therefore, in selecting parishes for further study, I looked for those in which there was a good rate of growth and an even trend that suggested steady progress. While I looked for a mix of congregation size, I dismissed those with very low attendances that might reflect merely temporary changes; the moving of one family with children into a parish, for example. Initial results were as follows:
### Research methods

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Anonymized Parish No.</th>
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<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>% 5 Years</th>
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Figure 2.3 Parishes in the Diocese of Canterbury: adult uSa growth trends 2002-2008, initial selection
### Research methods

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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.4  Parishes in the Diocese of Canterbury: under-16 uSa growth trends 2002-2008, initial selection
There were thirty-one churches that demonstrated steady growth trends, in which eleven showed positive trends in adult attendance, eleven in child attendance and nine in both.

Jackson (2002) presents evidence that liturgical tradition is an insignificant factor in church growth. Examination of the websites for these thirty-one growing churches in the Canterbury Diocese suggests that the incidence of liturgical and theological tradition is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>Adult growth only</th>
<th>Child growth only</th>
<th>Adult and child growth</th>
<th>Overall percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charismatic</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Evangelical</td>
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<td>2</td>
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</tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Catholic</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.5  Liturgical and theological tradition of 31 growing parishes in the Diocese of Canterbury

Whilst these results support Jackson's conclusion, they also suggest that

- Churches with a very clear tradition may be more likely to achieve growth in both adult and child attendance.
- Churches with a central tradition are more likely to focus on one type of growth or the other.
- Qualitative interviews will need to probe behind explanations which refer to tradition in order to identify common factors underlying attendance growth.

I then selected a more manageable group of six parishes with a mix of attendance size, liturgical tradition and demography in order to compare
qualitative results across different kinds of parish with similar growth trends. Of these, two showed positive trends in adult attendance, two in child attendance and two in both:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parish No.</th>
<th>Parish Code</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>% 5 Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>PC 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>PC 5</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>PC 2</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>PC 6</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.6** Parishes in the Diocese of Canterbury: adult uSa growth trends 2002-2008, final selection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parish No.</th>
<th>Parish Code</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>% 4 Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>PC 3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>PC 4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>PC 5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>273</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>PC 6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.7** Parishes in the Diocese of Canterbury: under-16 uSa growth trends 2002-2008, final selection

After the initial interview, however, the minister at PC6 failed to return any of my telephone messages and emails requesting permission to proceed with the questionnaire and congregational interviews. PC6, therefore, played no further part in my research. The final participants were:
Research methods

- PC1: a deeply rural church in a two-parish benefice with a monthly service. It has a central liturgical tradition.
- PC2: a village church in a single-parish benefice. It has an Anglo-Catholic liturgical tradition.
- PC3: a deeply rural church in a two-parish benefice. It has an evangelical liturgical tradition influenced by the charismatic movement.
- PC4: a church serving a socio-economically deprived area of a large town. Although in a two-parish benefice, it has its own priest. It has a very informal evangelical liturgical style.
- PC5: an eclectic church in a two-parish benefice in the heart of a large town. It has a Pentecostal theology but provides two services with different liturgical styles: one formal and evangelical, and one informal and Pentecostal.

Participants

Quantitative samples

Quantitative data concerning child attendance was derived from diocesan returns, attendance registers and other information held by ministers and leaders, in order to calculate a usual attendance figure for adults and children at main services or cell groups. 'Children' were deemed to be under sixteen, in accordance with usual practice in the Church of England.

Quantitative data concerning attendance by those with no prior church experience was derived from questionnaires designed by me except at FE(Network) and FE(Cafe Service)2, whose leaders had already used internal questionnaires with compatible data and preferred me to use those. All adult members of congregations were invited to complete questionnaires, along with teenagers from FE(Youth). 535 responses were received from a possible 607 questionnaires, 247 from fresh expressions and 288 from parish churches: a total response rate of 88 per cent.

I made a careful distinction between those who had first attended church as an adult elsewhere and those who had no prior experience of church before attending their current church, apart from occasions like baptisms, wedding or funerals, because I wanted to assess the capacity of these particular fresh
Research methods

expressions and churches to be able to attract the entirely unchurched.

The sample totals are different, therefore, with respect to attendance by children and the unchurched:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fresh expressions</th>
<th>Parish churches</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchurched</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>535</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.8 Quantitative samples

Qualitative samples

I considered that potential participants for interview fulfilled the criteria for my qualitative research if they were ministers, leaders, parents, children, teenagers, or if they only began to attend church as adults, apart from occasions like baptisms, wedding or funerals. I did not make a rigorous distinction between over- and under-16s, as I had in my quantitative sampling, because I considered older teenagers to continue to hold a topical insight into what motivates children to want to attend church. Similarly, I did not exclude those who had first attended church as an adult elsewhere, as I had in my quantitative sampling. Given the scarcity of those who attend without any child churchgoing experience, they became valuable sources in my attempt to reveal a theoretical explanation for attendance by the unchurched.

Ministers and leaders of fresh expressions and parish churches were important initial participants in my qualitative research because, as gatekeepers, they were able to grant access to their congregation or group; help me understand the demography and history of their context; explain their theoretical and practical approach to pastoral and mission strategy; provide their assessment and interpretation of trends of growth and decline, often revealed through selectivity in presenting qualitative and quantitative data of their own, and mediate the establishment of trust between myself as researcher and their members as research participants.

Other participants were identified as suitable for interview either by their
leader or minister, or by me on the basis of questionnaire responses. I then negotiated a time and place for the interview with the participants. In a few cases, it only emerged during interview that the participant did not fulfil my criteria. These interviews were completed but not subsequently used for analysis. Once the data generated from interviews added nothing new about the social processes I was investigating, I ceased arranging interviews. The final sample composition was:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fresh expressions</th>
<th>Parish churches</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ministers/Leaders</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children/teenagers</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churched Parents</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchurched Parents</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchurched non-Parents</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2.9 Qualitative samples*
3 RESULTS

Terminology

There are some terminology and symbols that may require explanation in my analysis:

- The word ‘services’ could be understood to refer to both religious ceremonies and to the provision of children's groups and activities for the local community. To avoid confusion, I have referred to the latter as ‘service-provision’.

- Transcription symbols are used as follows:

  I  Interviewer.
  [ One speaker’s talk is overlapped by another’s.
  = No gap in the talk.
  - Sudden halt.
  ? Rising tone at the end of a sentence.
  Underlining Stress on a word by pitch or amplitude.
  CAPITALS Especially loud talk relative to surrounding talk.
  ( ) Inability to hear what was said.
  (maybe) Parenthesized words: Possible hearings.
  ((pause))) Double parentheses: Descriptive note.
  [...] Omitted talk.

Quantitative data results

The quantitative results from attendance data are brief, but provide some preliminary information about the trends in the participating parish churches and fresh expressions with regard to attendance by children and those without a churchgoing background.

Children

A comparison of the mean values for child attendance as a percentage of total attendance in participant fresh expressions and parish churches demonstrates
that, as a total sample, the fresh expressions are significantly more effective at attracting children, although both are more effective than average:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faith community</th>
<th>Child attendance</th>
<th>Absolute deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fresh Expressions</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parish Churches</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Church of England uSa</em></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differential significance</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.098</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6.1  
Under-16s as a percentage of total attendance: mean scores

A comparison of the values for each participant faith community reveals a more nuanced analysis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faith community</th>
<th>Child attendance</th>
<th>Absolute deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FE(Messy Church)2</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE(Messy Church)1</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE(Youth)</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC3</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC4</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE(Café Service)1</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC5</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE(Café Service)2</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Church of England uSa</em></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC1</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC2</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE(Network)</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>-8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6.2  
Under-16s as a percentage of total attendance: by church
Results

If a higher percentage of children indicates that they are more central to the life of the church, then the two fresh expressions with a specific focus upon younger children are clearly particularly effective, even when compared to the two parish churches in the diocese with the fastest growing rate of (pre-pubescent) child attendance, PC3 and PC4:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Child attendance</th>
<th>Absolute deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Messy Churches</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC3 +PC4</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of England uSa</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differential significance 0.21

Figure 6.3 Under-16s as a percentage of total attendance: by focus on pre-pubescent children

Similarly, FE(Youth) is significantly more effective than the parish church in the sample which makes the best provision for teenage children, PC5:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Child attendance</th>
<th>Absolute deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FE(Youth)</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC5</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of England uSa</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differential significance 0.14

Figure 6.4 Under-16s as a percentage of total attendance: by focus on teenage children

All these, along with FE(Café Service)1, have made provision for children and families a priority for their congregational life and mission. Such provision therefore appears to correlate with a higher percentage of children attending, but the fresh expressions were generally more effective in this regard than the
parish churches.

The unchurched

A statistical comparison of fresh expressions and parish churches is not possible in relation to those with no prior churchgoing experience at all before joining their present congregations because no national measure exists to define the norm. These data are given, however, as a comparative to percentages of churchgoing experience at age eleven or twelve in order to demonstrate the close correlation between the two measures. A statistical comparison of the mean values for non-churchgoing at age eleven or twelve as a percentage of regular adult churchgoers demonstrates that there is no significant difference between fresh expressions and parish churches as a whole sample, although both are more effective than average:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-attendance age 11/12</th>
<th>Absolute deviation</th>
<th>No prior church attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fresh Expressions</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parish Churches</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSA +EVS 2008</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differential significance</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6.5** Non-churchgoing background as a percentage of regular adult churchgoers: mean scores

A comparison of the values for each participant faith community reveals a remarkable variation with few clear trends:
Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faith community</th>
<th>Non-attendance age 11/12</th>
<th>Absolute deviation</th>
<th>No prior church attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FE(Messy Church)2</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC3</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC5</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE(Network)</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC4</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE(Youth)</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE(Café Service)2</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC2</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSA +EVS 2008</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC1</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE(Messy Church)1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE(Café Service)1</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6.6**  
Non-churchgoing background as a percentage of regular adult churchgoers: by church

With the exception of PC5 and FE(Youth) there is a correlation between no childhood experience of church and no prior experience of church at all of less than four percentage points. FE(Youth) tends to recruit from the youth groups of churches in its deanery, so that PC5 appears to be the only unexplained anomaly. As predicted in Chapter 4, however, non-attendance at age eleven and twelve generally slightly inflates proportions of the unchurched but remains a useful general guide.

While the majority of faith-communities in my study have a higher than average proportion of regular attenders with no child churchgoing background, there is no evidence that the fresh expressions are generally more or less effective at attracting the unchurched than the parish churches. Intriguingly, the two messy churches show wildly differing results.

The null hypothesis I sought to test was:
Results

There is no significant difference between fresh expressions and growing parish churches in terms of the variation from the norm of attendance percentages for children and the unchurched.

These findings demonstrate that, among this sample, there is no significant difference between fresh expressions and growing parish churches with regard to the prior churchgoing experience of adults, but that there is a significant difference with regard to children. Both as whole samples and in particular cases, fresh expressions demonstrated a significantly higher child attendance percentage than parish churches. Given that this sample is not representative of either fresh expressions or growing parish churches generally, I do not claim that these findings apply beyond this sample, although they do raise questions of wider applicability that will be considered in Chapter 7. The main purpose of this limited quantitative research, however, was to provide the first phase in addressing the central research question, which the qualitative data would then complete:

To what extent and in what ways do qualitative data arising from fresh expressions and parish churches in the Diocese of Canterbury give a comprehensive and nuanced explanation of the processes responsible for any quantitative differences in their ability to attract children or those with no prior churchgoing experience?

Qualitative data results

Why attend?

I wanted, first, to understand why people try a church out. It soon became clear that there were some core factors significant to the experience of most participants, both in the frequency with which they were described and in the centrality of their influence upon the process of deciding to attend for the first time.

Life-change events

For thirty-eight of the forty-three adult participants a significant life-change event triggered the process that eventually resulted in belonging to a faith
community. Not surprisingly, since one of my particular focuses was child attendance, life changes to do with the birth, growth and changing needs of children featured frequently in participants' responses. Birth; baptism as a rite of passage; becoming toddlers, and starting at primary or qualifying for a secondary school are all examples. Other life changes mentioned were quite wide-ranging: bereavement, divorce, moving house, exclusion from school during sixth form, criminal arrest, the onset of alcoholism and children leaving home. Combinations of factors appear to strengthen an openness to consider church attendance; where moving house was combined with children's developmental needs or divorce, for example.

Such life changes appear to create a dissonance between past and future identities, with the present being in flux and pregnant with possibility. Even something as natural, and desirable, as a child's changing needs appears to engender this quality of reflection about the capacity of the past self to cope adequately with future reality and the unsettling reformulation of a self-image that can be projected into the future:

Nick: Becoming a father really changed my perspective on life. There was that real sort of sense of responsibility that I suddenly had.

Of the five participants who did not mention a life-change event, the interviews of three were so brief it was unclear what had triggered the process, so that only two participants demonstrated a clear exception to this trend. For both Carl and Muriel something happened in the course of everyday life:

Interviewer: So how is it, then, that you began to attend PCS?
Carl: Well, I experienced something spiritual in my everyday life and I wasn't quite sure of what that was.

Interviewer: So why did you come back and how did it happen?
Muriel: That, literally, was- yeah, it was an 'off the cuff' thing. She had a dance exam=

Interviewer: =Sorry, who?
Results

Muriel: Sorry, Kirsty had a- Kirsty had a dance exam, yes, at the hall just over the way from PC5 and we noticed Grandad’s car was parked outside and I said, "Oh, come on, let’s go in". [...] So, yeah, it was just literally, sort of, ‘spur of the moment’ thing.

Carl and Muriel’s experiences are different from one another, however. Muriel slips easily back into a pattern she had known as a child; no major shift is necessary for her to do so. Carl has no prior churchgoing experience and, although there have been no structural changes to his life, his unfamiliar and unlooked-for spiritual experience appears to have had a similar effect to that which major life changes had on others. His sense of self is altered and he feels compelled to make sense of his new identity as someone who experiences the supernatural. Muriel, therefore, remains the only clear exception among forty-three adult participants to some life change being the catalyst for the process that ended in church attendance.

Life-change events were also associated with the start of the process by which children attended for the first time, but more subtly, since the life change was often their own birth or development, and the subjects of the process were often not themselves but their parents. Sometimes, however, children were significant subjects in their own right. Primary school children from four families were clearly instrumental in persuading their parents to take them to services or Sunday school because school friends attended, and this was enough to suggest a possible resolution to the parents’ need to facilitate their child’s development. For the teenagers, all churchgoers as younger children, puberty appears to have been accompanied by a strong desire to establish a Christian identity of their own, separate from that of their family.

Known people

If events that disturb a previously unquestioned identity create the potential for church attendance, other factors are necessary for the process to unfold. Chief among these is the influence of someone already known. For seventy-nine of all eighty-nine participants somebody already known to them mediated their first attendance at a service, Sunday school or small group. For
Results

pre-pubescent children this was usually parents though, for a few, it was school friends.

For teenagers and adults, the known mediators were usually parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, neighbours, or acquaintances made at church service-provision groups, like playgroups. For only five participants was the known person a minister.

Of the ten participants who did not clearly indicate the role of a mediator it seems likely that two were invited by someone known to them but their interview was too brief to be clear. Only eight participants first attended through their own unmediated initiative.

Four of these were already churchgoers whose life changes caused them to change churches (relocation, church closure and the birth of a child). For two non-churchgoers, a life change seems to have evoked memories of childhood churchgoing, motivating them to seek a church that would help them.

Of the two with no prior churchgoing experience, Mary had attended a church youth group as a teenager and, when faced with divorce and relocation, recalled her past experience that church can provide community. Only one participant with no prior contact with church of any kind made an initial approach entirely unaided, and this was not in order to attend, but to have herself and her new baby baptized. At the time, in 1990, Liz had been conscious that she was unusual in not being baptized and wanted to correct that:

Liz: I always had this kind of feeling that, I don't know, that either I'd missed out on something or I was different than everybody else because I went, subsequently, to Christenings and thought, "Well I wasn't Christened"; I knew I wasn't Christened. And, after I'd had my son, I knew that I wanted to have Robert Christened. [...] I phoned Father Ian and said, "Hello vicar. My name's Liz. I want to arrange to have my child Christened", you know, "What do I need to do?" and he said, "I'll come around and see you". And he came round and we sat in that room in there and I said to him, I said, "By the way," I said "when you Christen Robert," I said "would you mind doing me at the same time".
Results

Her later attendance was due to the influence of the minister:

Liz: He said to me, he said, "I will baptize you", he said, "but you ought to let yourself know- you ought to know what you’re letting yourself in for". He said, "I’m just about to start confirmation classes. Would you like to come?". Well I had no idea what a confirmation class was but it seemed to me quite reasonable, that if I was requesting of this person to be Christened, that he would say to me, "Well, yes I will, but you ought to understand what you’re doing". That seemed to me to be a reasonable exchange and so I said, "Yes".

With the exception of Liz, therefore, the participants needed the mediation of either a known person or a prior experience of a church in order to channel the questions of identity raised by a life-change event towards resolution in the context of a faith community. Even for Liz, getting to know the minister and other confirmation candidates in a small group setting was necessary before she even considered attending a service.

Questions and small groups

For the ten participants with no prior church background and no children, the role of profound existential questions was closely linked with life-change events, known people and small groups like confirmation classes, house groups and the Alpha course. As Nick has demonstrated, even becoming a father can raise deep questions about the adequacy of an existing philosophical and moral framework. However, when intense adverse life changes like death or divorce occur, the drive to find a resolution to the profound questions of meaning or identity they precipitate seems to become even more insistent. Turning to known, trusted people who suggested to these participants that their faith community might help in some way, the process that ended in them also joining it could begin. Struggling with a traumatic year in which both grandparents’ died and his parents’ divorced, Dave’s questions first emerged to his girlfriend:
Results

Interviewer: Had those questions begun to arise before you met Kirsty?
Dave: Yeah, they were kind of always there in the back of my mind but I really, you know, kind of began seeking and really thinking about those things probably around the same time as I started seeing Kirsty.

Interviewer: Ok, so what has been her role in making those questions become more critical? Do you think there is a connection between the fact that the questions began to be more important when you started going out with her?
Dave: Possibly. I mean, it was a weird time in my life because I’d just gone- like- my grandparents, who I was very close to, they died within a year of each other and my parents had split up so it was a bit of a stressful time for me so maybe that had something to with it.

After his mother died, Richard turned to a minister who was a friend of the family:

Richard: My mother died suddenly in 1994 and up 'til then I would say that, on a good day, I believed in something. [...] she’d been ill for a few years, and it was the first time I had to face up to death and I thought, "Well, if it could happen to my mother it could happen to me" [...] and what happened was, the chap who did my mum’s funeral was a chap called Cyril; [...] and the reason Cyril did it, because my dad grew up with Cyril. So he got Cyril from PCS to do it and [...]- I said to him, "When you’ve got a couple of hours, Cyril, could I pop round sometime and have a chat with you?" and he said, "You come round any time".

Both were introduced by their trusted people to a forum in which such questions could be addressed. For Dave, it was Alpha:

Dave: My girlfriend, who’s now my fiancée, she went here with her
Results

family? She’s been going her whole life? And I wasn’t a Christian and she basically dragged me along to an Alpha course? And no-one in my family’s a Christian; I wasn’t brought up with it, but I went onto this Alpha course and became a Christian that way. [...]  

Interviewer: How did you find the Alpha course?  
Dave: At first, because I was an atheist, I thought it, you know, was all a load of rubbish and, you know- but I was looking into that, you know, looking into things like, you know, the way the world works; and the universe; and why we’re here, and stuff like that so I was searching for something and it just kind of answered all my questions.

Richard was invited to a house group:  

Richard: And that's what kicked it off. I explained to him my worries; my views on God and everything and he was very, very good. He sat there and, what I liked about Cyril, he listened and then he would ask- answer my questions and he said, "Richard, if you ever fancy coming to a house group-", and I said, "What's a house group?". So he told me what a house group was all about. He said, "I run one; a very informal one; it's a Wednesday night", he said, "There's about half-a-dozen of us here. If you fancy coming along one night, mate, come along". And that's what I did.

Both functioned as a safe and supportive group in which Richard and Dave’s existential questions could find resolution:

Richard: One thing comes to mind: how ordinary the people were. They were just like me, they was ordinary; they didn't have sort of- weren't- didn't have wings or haloes round their heads, you know, they was very ordinary people; very nice people, very friendly, made me feel welcome and, again, I asked a lot of questions.

*  

Interviewer: What made you stick at it – what made you continue to go?
Dave: Apart from getting dragged along by Kirsty every week? ((laugh)) I don’t know, it was interesting. For me it didn’t matter that I didn’t believe in it. But I was kind of searching for something. It was interesting; it was intriguing. [...] I was searching for something; I didn’t know what. You know, I was, you know, looking into things, you know, what, you know, because I, you know, it’s the age-old question: ‘Why are we here?’ You know, ‘What’s the meaning of life?’; all of this and it was- I kind of thought about it all the time – it kind of became an obsession. And that’s what kind of brought me to faith and, you know, kind of answered all my questions and- yeah- that’s what brought, you know, brought me to kind of go to the Alpha course and brought me into my faith.

For both Dave and Richard, their small groups eventually introduced them to wider participation in a church: Dave becoming a member of a cell at FE(Network) and Richard a churchgoer at PC5. They exemplify well the complex interplay between a variety of factors that may need to occur in the process of being socialized into a faith community for someone with no prior church experience. A life-change event; unresolved questions of meaning and identity; a known person who is part of a faith community; an arena within which questions can be addressed and resolved; a welcoming group of people. At the end of his interview, Dave sees these interconnections quite clearly:

Dave: My questions and meeting Kirsty and hearing people talk about God and going on the Alpha course, it just kind of pulled it all together. You know, it fitted together like a jigsaw in the end and kind of- answered my questions.

Not all those with no prior church background and no young children experienced the intensity of inner questioning of Richard and Dave; however, all, without exception, needed to find some forum in which questions of identity raised by life change could find resolution, usually through the mediation of a known person. The satisfactory resolving of questions was accompanied by new relationships and the gradual adoption of a new,
Results

Christian, identity. This process eventually facilitated wider participation in a faith community. For four of them, their congregations were small and supportive enough to be themselves that forum, along with intense initial support from their minister. For the others it was a small group of some kind.

A child-oriented environment

Of the twenty-three adults with children who themselves went to church as children, thirteen were already churchgoers before attending their current church or fresh expression. Three who attended FE(Messy Church)2 also attended somewhere else on a Sunday and thought of FE(Messy Church)2 as community service-provision rather than as a church. Five chose their new church after moving to the area. Five chose to change churches because of their children’s developing needs. For all of them, however, the new choice was made because of the benefit to their children and the family-oriented nature of the new environment. Acceptance of the disruption young children can cause; the presence of other families with children; activities and learning geared to specific age groups; crèche and Sunday school provision, and engagement of the whole family in some services were all mentioned as significant reasons for the new choice.

These factors were also significant in the process by which the non-churchgoing parents either returned to or started attending church, in that they helped address the concern of parents to meet their children’s developing needs. For most non-churchgoers, however, there needed to be an added catalyst to motivate this change to their pattern of life. There was no discernible difference between parents with a churchgoing and non-churchgoing childhood in this regard. For a heightened concern for their children’s needs to be transformed into church attendance there usually needed to be an additional life change; a specific suggestion or invitation to attend from a known person; a linked event, such as a parent and toddler group, or a combination of these. Only for Muriel was it ‘an "off the cuff" thing’ and, even for her, the trigger for her new behaviour was seeing the car of a known person outside the church.
Results

Ministers

If it is rare that a minister makes an effective first contact after life changes raise questions of identity or meaning, he or she can often play an important role in relation to other factors later on. Running youth groups, house groups, confirmation classes or Alpha courses; attending associated facilities like parent and toddler groups where their approach could be showcased, and taking school assemblies and RE classes were all ways in which ministers provided resources for these participants in their journey towards involvement with a faith community. Surprisingly, however, there are very few examples of Occasional Offices being effective vehicles for this process. The funeral, for Richard, and baptisms, for Liz and Nick and Maggie were significant only insofar as they led to participation in a house-group, confirmation classes and an Alpha course. A marriage preparation course had a profound impact on Chris and Denise, but they were already members of FE(Network) by then.

Summary

Usually, a life-change event triggered questions of identity which, when mediated by a known person or positive memories of church experience, led to first contact with a faith community in the hope of resolution. Teenagers and those children active in the process needed to know the environment would be tailored to the needs of their age group. Non-parents with no church background needed a safe environment in which their questions could be addressed. Parents needed to know there would be benefit to their children.

Ministers facilitated the process through their own pastoral skills or the provision of a variety of groups or events. There were very few exceptions to this pattern.

I could detect no differences between those attending parish churches and fresh expressions in the unfolding of the process that led them to attend a church service or group.

Initial experience

Most younger children were either unable to recall their initial encounter with
Results

their church or unable to distinguish that memory from their present perspective. This section, therefore, focuses on responses from teenagers and adults.

Negative feelings.

In attempting to assess the impact of participants’ initial experience of faith-communities in their subsequent decision to keep attending, it is intriguing that negative feelings were reported by twenty-four out of the forty-six adult or teenage participants who spoke about their initial experience. They included finding the services strange, anxiety about not knowing enough, being nervous about not knowing people and feeling unwelcome. These twenty-four participants demonstrate that negative feelings, in themselves, do not necessarily have a detrimental effect upon the process of joining a church.

Two kinds of participant were more likely than others to report a negative feeling. The first were teenagers; eight out of nine did so. The main anxiety of all teenagers, without exception, was the feeling of vulnerability about being a newcomer in a group who knew each other. Given that all spoke of subsequently making their own choice of commitment to the Christian faith and their faith community, as distinct from their parent’s choice for them, it seems likely that the questions of identity these teenagers were facing contributed to their anxiety when encountering the apparent assurance of the existing group.

Secondly, fourteen out of nineteen adults with a non-churchgoing childhood reported negative feelings. Some found the proceedings strange and bewildering, while others felt anxiety about their ignorance or that they would be unknown and, perhaps, not accepted. By contrast, only two out of seventeen adults with a childhood experience of church reported a negative feeling. For both, there was something different from their childhood experience that they found strange. It seems clear that not having the familiarity with church social customs, traditions and teaching which a churchgoing childhood brings significantly increases the anxieties of newcomers.

The impact of these negative feelings was mitigated by a number of factors.
Results

First, the force of the motivation that had led participants to attend was strong enough not to be deflected by anxiety or negative experience. This was particularly important for the five participants who reported only negative feelings about their initial experience:

Oz: The community was- not- I wasn’t always, like- I didn’t always feel completely welcomed at the start but I was always compelled to carry on? I never felt that I didn’t want to go, because- I’m not sure. I was just- sort of always compelled me to carry on.

Second, negative feelings were usually accompanied by simultaneous positive experiences when attending for the first time:

Interviewer: What about you, Denise? What were your first impressions the first day you went?

Denise: People were really, really friendly. And then the children; they were allowed- there’s all, like, toys- and percussion instruments at the back. And I remember her picking up a tambourine and I was, like, “No! Please not the tambourine!” ((laugh)) -and then looked round and every child had one – “Ok then, that’s fine.”. And they were allowed to just- they didn’t have to sit down and be quiet. They were allowed to [...] get up and do their own thing and play out the back bit if they wanted to. So it was just, like, the friendliness of it, really, and the kind of- the ease of it all.

Interviewer: And what about the service itself; how did that strike you?

Denise: [...] good because you didn’t feel out of place- but weird kind of, “Is this really happening?”. Because it was something you’d expect to see on some American cult ![gospel-right! ((laugh))]

Chris: [Gospel TV show, yeah. ( ) isn’t it?]

Denise: And I remember sitting there thinking, “Oh what is going on?” Like people just starting to “Hallelujah” all over the place! And I was like-((laugh))

Chris: Yeah, compared to the church we used to go to, or went into, at
Results

school it was more lively. It was, like, not so
[solemn wasn't it?
Denise: [Yeah. Yeah. And people just randomly kept praying.

For some, these positive experiences were enough to dissipate their anxieties immediately:

Interviewer: So can you remember what your first impressions of PC5 were the first time you walked in, sat down and experienced the service?
Carl: Yeah. Very laid-back and very welcoming. I had a lot of kind of preconceptions of what it would be and a lot of kind of fears of what it would be but they were kind of not there when I actually came to it and I actually sat down and walked around and people were talking to me, it was a very nice, great atmosphere.

Third, for some, the very tension caused by unfamiliarity became a spur to learn and understand:

Liz: And then there was the day when, as I say, when I first went into church and this alien environment and, of course, if you know- if you're a thinking person, "Well, what does that mean? Why do they do that? What's that? Why is that? Why is he wearing that? Why did they say that? What's the significance of that?"; a million questions. When you go in there, a million questions. [...] "Well, what does that mean? Why did they do that? Why do they say that? Why are we using that particular thing? Why do people do this?"; it was all just as strange as strange could be.
Interviewer: But you found those questions interesting?
Liz: Oh, they were interesting, yes, they were. Well, anything that you don't understand is interesting.

Finally, for most, the source of the discomfort evaporated in a relatively short time through the efforts of existing churchgoers to put the newcomers at ease by being welcoming and friendly; through ministers effectively communicating
Results

an understanding of the Christian tradition, and through the familiarity engendered by regular practice.

Statistically, it was significantly more likely for a negative initial experience to occur at a fresh expression than a parish church, but this result is skewed by the heightened anxieties of the teenagers, 89 per cent of whom attended FE(Youth). Taking only adult participants, 41 per cent reported negative initial experiences at fresh expressions and 45 per cent at parish churches. In terms of process, the effect of negative experiences was also similar in both environments.

The only major variation from the general pattern occurred within the messy churches. Of the adults without childhood churchgoing experience, none of those at messy churches reported negative feelings, whereas all those at other fresh expressions reported them. The other main difference between these two groups is that all but one at messy churches did not consider themselves to be attending a church, despite the overt Christian content; they viewed messy church as a children's service-provision group and their child's participation was sufficient to resolve the heightened sense of parental responsibility that had brought them. The exception was Belle, and she was a member of the organizing team. In addition, none of them participated in worship, which happened as a finale in which the children were withdrawn from their parents in a group for action songs, prayers and simple teaching. By contrast, the seven participants at other fresh expressions were all quite clear that they were choosing to attend a church for the first time. Both their consciousness of the significance of this decision for a changing identity and full participation in worship appears to have heightened their sense of apprehension or the strangeness of the proceedings.

Positive experiences.

There are two ways to view the positive initial experiences described by the forty participants who mentioned them. The first is to focus on the language used to describe their subjective experience of the first visit. When asked about their first impressions of the service or group they attended, no participant gave a merely rational, objective account of its merits or faults. All described their feelings. The most common descriptors employed were good,
nice, enjoyed, lovely, interesting, comfortable, fun, happy, impact, brilliant, and pleasant. Any negative feelings were shown to be superseded by these positive ones. Clearly, these first positive feelings were important to these participants as they related their account of the process by which they came to join their faith community.

The second is to examine the objective qualities that gave rise to the participants' positive response. By far the most common observation was how welcoming and friendly the congregation or group members were. Thirty out of forty participants made it. The experience of welcome and friendliness also generated more positive subjective descriptors than any other factor.

Not only were welcome and friendliness the most common initial experience spoken about, they seemed to play a role of central importance in the process of socialization into this new setting. First, a warm welcome eased the fears of those who had been anxious about not being known:

Miriam: Well it was actually quite daunting going into a church congregation, not knowing who's there and the people and, you know, taking that first step through the door. [...] Interviewer: But how was it when you got there? [...] Miriam: Oh, really lovely. Once we got through the door it was lovely, yeah, they were just so nice, so welcoming and friendly.

Next, it helped disarm any sense of threat from the strangeness of utterly new experiences:

Richard: The Vicar said, “Would you stand for the Peace” so everyone stood up so I got up and I thought, "I can't sit down" and he said, “The Peace of the Lord be with you” and so everyone sort of started shaking hands and hugging and kissing and everything and I thought, “What is this about?”. Because I didn't know. And several people come up to me and, you know, said, “Oh, peace with you” and I- yeah, shook their hands of course, you know, but didn't have a clue what was going on. And when people went up for Communion [...] the Vicar says, “If you'd like to come up for a
Results

blessing [...])” And that’s what I did; [...] took my courage and then went up there and it was a very nice service and I come away feeling a sense of peace.

It also gave a positive ambience within which other dimensions of the new setting could also be appreciated:

Interviewer: What were your first impressions of the first Sunday service that you went to?
Maggie: It was really friendly. At that time [...] you had a mix of music; you had traditional music and modern worship, which was- that was really nice as well and everybody- it was very friendly; very welcoming and people spoke to you and, again, the teaching was really good teaching but in a way that you could easily understand it.

Finally, it was spoken of as being the beginning of deepening relationships:

Richard: My first impressions of going to a house group was how normal everyone was. And they were nice; nice people. And [...] some of the people who I met I am real solid good friends with, you know.

Another tranche of positive experiences might be described as contributing to, as three participants put it, the ‘atmosphere’ of the church or group. Welcome and friendliness formed the foundation of this for most participants and churches but, apart from this, there were a variety of perceptions with most responses weighted towards particular settings and with few common factors discernible. Worship was mentioned only by those who had initially attended services either at PC5 and FE(Network), often described as ‘lively’ or ‘upbeat’, or PC2 with its Anglo-Catholic liturgical tradition. Therefore, it was only informal, contemporary worship or Anglo-Catholic ritual which was identified as a positive initial experience, either because it was different from that experienced in the past or because an already churchgoing participant had been looking for it. A ‘relaxed’ atmosphere was also appreciated at most faith
Results

communities. The beauty of the building was mentioned only once. A churchgoing background appeared not to shape these types of response; nine participants gave one, nine did not.

A churchgoing background did shape the next set of responses, however, which were to do with the impact of the Christian tradition through preaching, teaching, Bible study and discussion. Eleven out of seventeen participants who identified this as a positive experience had not attended church as a child and, of the six who had, only two had been adult churchgoers prior to their first visit. Both of these were attending other churches on a Sunday and viewed FE(Messy Church)2 as a Christian children's services-provider, which supplemented their church's teaching for their children. For the other fifteen participants, however, effective engagement with the content of the Christian tradition was essential in order to address the questions of identity that life-changes had raised for them. While the participants themselves were clearly highly motivated, the contribution of the ministers was also vital in this regard; participants commented on how they made their preaching ‘interesting’, ‘relevant’ or ‘understandable’:

Mary: But I went along and the minister was gifted, in my opinion, on his sermons. They were so relevant, so well, they really made an impact on me, so I was so glad that I'd gone.

In conversation or group discussion, too, participants appreciated the ministers’ care and skill in allowing and answering all kinds of question, while other group members were said to respect the newcomers’ questions:

Mike: I was quite a questioning mind. [...] He would open up a bit of Scripture and he would throw out a question on- and I would ask a question and he would throw out another little teaser and then I then would come back on him, so there was a lot to-ing and fro-ing; it wasn't just me, there was other people as well who were kind of- this kind of banter. But he wasn't trying to give the full story in one hit. He was quite a canny evangelist, and he was kind of like fishing and drawing the interest in, bringing you in. So that,
Results

really was the thing that actually kind of made me kind of say, "Right. Ok. I'm going w- I'm going to go with this.

The final set of positive responses came from parents who appreciated the provision for children and families. Three factors were important to them: the presence of other children; being comfortable that other worshippers would not be disturbed by the noise they may make, and activities or worship that engaged their children’s attention:

Nick: There were a lot of families; there were a lot of young people; the service was geared to young children and so I- automatically, we felt very comfortable there; it was relevant to us, you know.

Summary

While participants' recollections of their initial experience of a Christian church or group contained some disparate elements, there were some significant common themes. Teenagers and those who had never attended church experienced negative feelings that had to be overcome with the help of a variety of positive factors. Welcome and friendliness was important to most participants. Effective engagement with the content of the Christian tradition was particularly important to those without a churchgoing background. Parents needed to know that children’s needs were provided for. Only contemporary or ritualistic worship styles made a positive impact at the first visit. There was no significant variation of response between those at fresh expressions and those at parish churches although, within fresh expressions, messy churches demonstrated a slightly different pattern.

Why stay?

For the majority of participants, their initial encounter was the beginning of a continued association with their parish church or fresh expression in which a new identity was forged as a Christian who belongs to a particular faith community. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the three main factors that participants recalled positively from their first visit are closely linked with
the three factors that participants most valued about their subsequent experience of church.

**Community and relationships**

Eighty-one of the eighty-nine participants specifically mentioned social interaction, friendships or the experience of community as an important dimension of their involvement in their parish church or fresh expression. However, social interaction was clearly also being enjoyed by the remaining nine from the context of the interview or way they described other dimensions of their church.

From this wealth of description, I was able to discern a clear pattern in which participants became progressively enfolded in and defined by the network of social relationships within their faith community. All participants engaged in social interaction within their faith communities and had developed acquaintances with whom they felt at ease. Most had then been invited by their acquaintances or their minister to participate in activities, groups or events other than the one that they had first attended and friendships had begun to develop, often beyond formal programmes. Many then took on particular responsibilities within their faith community and began to relate to others as close colleagues:

![Figure 6.7 Deepening association with a community](image)

The opportunities afforded by faith-communities for participation and responsibility were many and varied:
### Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities for participation</th>
<th>Opportunities for responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Services;</td>
<td>Building and grounds maintenance;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s groups;</td>
<td>Joining welcome teams;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth groups;</td>
<td>Serving refreshments or meals;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games, icebreakers, quizzes within services;</td>
<td>Hosting cell groups;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praying/ prophesying aloud;</td>
<td>Organizing social events;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage course,</td>
<td>Bible readings;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha/Youth Alpha;</td>
<td>Intercessions;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House/cell groups;</td>
<td>Playing music;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer groups;</td>
<td>Singing;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation courses;</td>
<td>Drama;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilgrimage;</td>
<td>Administration of chalice;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferences;</td>
<td>Set-up/down &amp; operating AV systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fund-raising;</td>
<td>Prayer ministry teams;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social events;</td>
<td>Giving talks/preaching;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal socializing.</td>
<td>Helping with messy church;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evangelism;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PCC membership;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administrative tasks;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership teams;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pastoral care;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leading: services, children’s and youth groups, Alpha/Youth Alpha groups, marriage courses, house/cell groups, prayer groups.</td>
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</table>

#### Figure 6.8 Integration into a new social network: Opportunities mentioned by participants

For some, this new social network replaced prior ones:

**Nick:** It became a really huge part of our life, to the point where, actually, we found a shift in our social network or our friends; we would find that, actually, a lo- pretty much all we were doing was with church family. And, like many people do, we saw people shy
Results

away from us; I lost friends after becoming a Christian, more through their lack of understanding, I think; it's not through us just sort of walking away; we've just naturally moved on.

Although most participants were at a variety of stages of integration into the social networks of their faith community, only two described the beginnings of a sense of disintegration having been central to its life for a number of rears. Both Maggie and her husband had begun to lose their sense of identification with the community:

Maggie: Quite recently and I had... did almost leave, actually, very recently and, (in point...) I think it w... probably the Sunday you were there. And that's sort of feeling of, sometimes, although I love PC5 and it's full of some lovely people, it is... there are cliques and, sometimes, you can find yourself on your own and nobody will notice and you can feel quite lonely sometimes.

Nick: We've found, recently, actually, that that support network we felt, at times, has shrunk? [...] I'm, actually, now finding that my support network is in my work family because I'm now working with a wide range of denominational people.

Sixteen participants described their church community as a social network that gave effective pastoral care and support in times of difficulty. Seven of these attended five different churches but nine were from PC5, indicating an unusually strong consensus about the quality of the pastoral support received there from the congregation rather than from ministers.

Christian tradition

If one dimension of the construction of a new Christian identity was increasing participation in a new network of relationships, another was increasing engagement with and internalization of Christian tradition. Theological emphasis, liturgical traditions, ecclesiology and styles of teaching or learning may have differed amongst the faith-communities, but the process of shaping a
Results

new self-perception in the context of Christian tradition was common to all but those few participants who viewed messy church as children's service-provision.

Some social contexts were also learning contexts, and vice versa. Children's and young people's groups, cell or house groups, Alpha courses, confirmation classes, marriage courses, pilgrimages and prayer groups were all occasions for deepening both relationships and an understanding of Christian tradition. This integrated process also, perhaps, establishes the parameters of friendship; that a common faith is integral to deepening bonds of friendship within the context of a faith community, cementing both more solidly. So that, when Nick eventually began to question the relevance of the teaching at PC5 for more established Christians, attendance became less frequent and relationships strained:

Nick: The risk is, as you mature in your faith, that, actually, the sermon alone is not going to feed you. And so I'm at a place now that, [...] to some extent I feel I'm outgrowing my church [...] actually, in terms of the biblical teaching I'm receiving, for me, it's, perhaps, not hitting that mark now, [...] actually, some Sundays I don't go to church because I am being fed throughout the week and sometimes I just need to take a step back [...] people notice that and people will comment on that and people will say, "We've missed you" or, perhaps, our church leadership will say, "Well, they're suddenly not coming and..."

There is a suggestion here that Nick's own identity has continued to develop outside the context of PC5 and that, despite helping to maintain it for six years, he no longer entirely identifies with its central myth.

Fifty of the eighty-nine participants mentioned the quality of the teaching or their process of learning as something they appreciated about their faith community. Of particular interest, however, is the distribution of these responses. While 59 per cent of parents appreciated teaching or learning, 100 per cent of non-parents and teenagers did so. These were precisely the participants for whom profound questions of meaning or identity were most
Results

intense and whose desire to resolve them carried them through initial negative feelings. Clearly, their interaction with the content of Christian tradition was central to this process of resolution and the construction of a new identity. The kinds of words used to describe the teaching or their learning is also illustrative of an interactive process. Participants spoke of relevance to everyday life; being easy to take in; understanding; enjoyment; learning new things; explanation; provoking thought; asking questions; questions being answered; openness to debate; good discussion; freedom to think; wanting to learn more; insight; interest; fascination; discovery; resonance; growth.

Although worship might have been expected to feature as an important carrier of and means of identification with Christian tradition, only twenty-two of the fifty-two adult participants specifically mentioned it as being important to them. Most of these participants attended services where the liturgical approach is informal and the music style is contemporary and led by worship bands. Others mentioned loving hymns and finding Anglo-Catholic ceremonial both mysterious and fascinating; an occasion for learning and discovery. Although most participants attending services that were of a more central tradition spoke of them as being enjoyable, they tended not to specify elements of liturgy or hymnody as being helpful in the same way as those attending more contemporary or ritualistic styles of service.

Child provision and family orientation

All thirty-two parents appreciated the provision for children at their parish church or fresh expression. The most common factor mentioned by parents as important to them was that their children should want to attend and find it enjoyable; eighteen out of thirty-two parents expressed this. At times, this was in conscious contrast to their own childhood experience:

Harry: When my father took me to church it was more or less- well, not by force, but, “We’re going here” and “We're going there". Ian now enjoys going to church: he says, “Church” - he knows it’s- and this is exactly what I’m after. It’s part of the routine. He’s comfortable in the church; he likes going in there.
Of such central importance was this to some parents that they would not have attended if their children had not wanted to:

Natalie: Miriam and a few others that had said, "Come along; you'll actually find it's not like you're expecting". And I'd said, "No", and I'd said, "No", and then we said, "Yes", didn't we? And we discussed it and I said did they want to go and see what it was like.

Others would change churches if their children no longer enjoyed attending:

Chris: Probably, if Deirdre wasn't getting anything out of Sunday school, we'd have to move somewhere which was a lot better for her. Because she enjoys her Sunday school.

What children enjoy, therefore, along with other parental criteria, is of critical importance to these parents' decision to remain in their churches.

The following table compares the quantitative incidence of factors mentioned by both parents and children as important to them regarding their church's provision for families:
Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>% parents</th>
<th>% children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community and friendship</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective teaching and learning</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child enjoys and wants to attend</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family oriented services</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development through participation</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with Christ</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral development</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6.9 Important elements in child provision by Churches: Factors cited by parents and children

Common for parents, therefore, was the desire for a family-oriented environment in which their children learned about the Christian faith through effective teaching and developed a sense of belonging to a community. Many also appreciated the range of participative activities offered and hoped that their children would develop skills, morality and a relationship with Christ through their experience of church. Above all, they wanted their children to enjoy the experience and to want to attend. All but five of these parents attend their present faith community specifically because of its provision for children, five of them having transferred from other churches for this reason. While only nine parents indicated that they would leave if the present provision for children was removed, it seems safe to assume that most would do so.

Most children appreciated a variety of activities tailored to their age and needs and the friends with which they enjoyed them. A majority also appreciated learning about the Christian faith through their activities and the family-oriented services. Although only a large minority verbalized their sense of enjoyment, it was clear that most were enthusiastic about attending. There
were only three dissenting voices about the enjoyment of children's activities. Neither eight-year-old Malachi nor five-year old Faith enjoyed the worship section at the end of the FE(Messy Church)1 services. Malachi because 'All we do is we just like talk about things' and Faith because she doesn't like the actions to the songs. Both prefer the creative activities. Twelve-year old Nathan was feeling increasingly uncomfortable at PC3. Although he enjoyed the Sunday School when they first attended five years previously he is now becoming reluctant to attend. He and his twin sister had recently attended a Youth Alpha course used for confirmation preparation but, while he enjoyed the course, he felt that it did not answer his scientific questions adequately. While his sister was confirmed, Nathan chose not to be.

Ambience

As with their initial experience, participants' accounts of why they have continued to attend include responses about atmosphere or ambience. A particularly wide-ranging observation was about a warm and relaxed atmosphere, with no pressure to act in a particular way or assent to particular beliefs, and in which questions of any kind are welcome. Dave's response sums up nicely the way in which this relaxed ambience affects both the expectations of the community and the approach of leaders to engagement with Christian tradition:

Dave: it's very easy; there's no kind of pressure on you to behave or say one thing or do something. Yes, it's just very, very easy and they make you feel very welcome and very at ease. And I (don't) know, it's kind of you can sort of get along at your own pace.

While only twenty-three participants made this kind of observation, all of the participating parish churches and fresh expressions were described in similar ways by someone.

A sense of community, effective engagement with Christian tradition and good child provision appeared to combine with this relaxed atmosphere to create an environment that could be really enjoyed. Thirty-five participants said that they appreciated their church or fresh expression because they found
Results

it enjoyable, fun or entertaining.

For a small minority of participants, the ancient church building was a significant factor. For Rob and Udo at PC3 and Mary and Tamsin at PC1, the church building represents more than a place to meet or worship. It also represents a connection to the wider community in which it is set, both past and present, and the wider Christian tradition; as Mary put it, 'that deep sense of ancient history and the fact that Christianity goes way, way back'.

Transformation

Many participants communicated a sense of profound transformation over time as they told their stories of encountering faith-communities, participating in groups, developing relationships, growing in understanding of the Christian tradition, resolving questions, participating in worship and assuming responsibility. However, some participants highlighted particular experiences of personal change.

The teenagers at FE(Youth), all of whom attended church as younger children, spoke of the process by which they began to attend through their own choice, rather than that of a parent or grandparent, and to develop a faith of their own. All spoke of the participatory approach at FE(Youth) as helping them arrive at that choice along with special events organized by the FE(Youth) leaders like youth conferences, youth Alpha courses and confirmation. So important had this approach been for Oz and Ben's perception of their own shifting identity that they thought that they would have ceased attending church had FE(Youth) not been there.

Eight adults and teenagers spoke of a supernatural spiritual experience that entirely changed their perception of themselves; made Christian faith both personal and real to them, and strengthened their commitment to their faith community. For five of these, the experience was mediated through a 'charismatic' event or group. For two, the experience occurred in the course of everyday life. For one participant, the experiences occurred during Anglo-Catholic liturgy and a pilgrimage; for another, they happened during a sermon.

Twelve participants (including one child) spoke of the spiritual strength and freedom from fear that their faith or developing relationship with God has brought. Fourteen participants spoke of the changes to their pattern of life or
Results

lifestyle as they have embraced commitment to both church and Christian faith and forged new spiritual and moral practices from changing beliefs and values.

Belonging

A sense of belonging appears to emerge as all of these factors work together to create a new sense of identity that is rooted in a growing association with the participant’s faith community. Relationships deepen; participation leads to responsibility; there is an increasing facility and identification with Christian tradition, and patterns of belief and behaviour begin to change.

Twenty-seven of the fifty-two adult and teenage participants spoke of a sense of belonging having developed. For all of these this sense of belonging had developed within a year, and for eighteen of them it had developed within six months. Sixteen attributed this to the development of friendships, while ten attributed it to taking on specific responsibilities within their faith community.

Of those who did not speak of a sense of belonging having developed, fourteen were clearly well integrated into their faith-communities despite not having addressed the issue directly; one was attending for the first time; one had only attended three times; seven thought of Messy Church as child service-provision rather than church, and two were just beginning to feel they might belong as they were beginning to take on responsibilities at PC5 after a year of attendance.

Summary

The process of being drawn into a new social network through the gradual deepening of relationships and increasing participation was one fundamental dimension to a sense of belonging to a Christian faith community. Others were a developing understanding and internalization of Christian tradition, awareness of positive personal change and, for parents, the reassurance that their children were enjoying their own process of socialization into the faith community. Together, these transformational processes enabled the resolution of questions of identity and a shifting self-perception. An enjoyable and relaxed atmosphere seems to have enhanced this process of transition.
Results

As with initial experiences, there was no general variation of response between those at parish churches and those at fresh expressions although, once again, messy churches sometimes demonstrated a slightly different pattern.

Consumerism and altruism

I was also looking for an indication of the extent to which consumerism or altruism had formed participants’ expectations, attitudes and behaviour during the process by which they became members of faith-communities, and of whether there was any difference between those attending parish churches and those at fresh expressions.

Participant stories

Some evidence for consumer tendencies can be adduced from the data furnished by participant accounts of their involvement in parish churches or fresh expressions. For example, seven parents who were already churchgoers moved to their present faith community because they were all looking for good child provision. Barbara, Harry, Tina, Derek and Billie all left churches because their child-provision was deficient in order to attend their present churches. Criostal and Miriam moved house, but then spent some time doing ‘a scout around on all the churches’ before choosing PC5. Child provision was not the only commodity being looked for, however. Tina, Criostal and Miriam were also looking for a contemporary style of worship. Of the seven, four attended a fresh expression and three a parish church.

All eight teenagers at FE(Youth) attend because the activities, approach and style of worship there is designed to be attractive to young people; however, none of them sought it out as the adults had their new churches. They were all invited by others and six of them continued to attend the morning service at their parish churches after beginning to attend FE(Youth), while one only began to attend after her parish church had closed. Only Ben chose to leave his parish church immediately after joining FE(Youth).

The messy church services were the only contexts in which I encountered people who were using church services as children's service-provision rather
Results

than participating in a church, despite the overt religious content. These nine parents were attending because they saw the quality of the provision for their children's needs but, uniquely among the participants, they had not yet begun to build relationships within the Christian community running the services. Five of them had not adopted a Christian identity at all while, for three, the locus of their Christian identity was elsewhere. Only one spoke of starting to recover her Christian identity. Even those at PC3 for whom a primary motivation for attending was qualification for a church secondary school had been successfully socialized into the church community and had forged a new identity as members of it. The other fresh expressions were similar to the parish churches in this regard, possibly because all emphasized the importance of relationships within the faith community as well as the quality of their service-provision.

The reasons that these nine parents gave for continuing to attend were twofold. They perceived messy church to be an enjoyable and entertaining environment for their children to which the children want to come and in which they have fun, learn and interact with others through the varied activities specifically tailored to them. They also appreciated the chance to socialize with other adults.

However, none of them had any role or responsibilities at messy church. None of them spoke of their socializing as a function of community, or even as friendship. None of them was engaged in Christian worship. In both messy church services, the worship section happened as a finale in which the children were withdrawn from their parents in a group for action songs, prayers and simple teaching, leaving their parents either to observe or to continue conversation with other adults. Only two saw themselves as even attending a church, although all were happy with the non-intrusive nature of the Christian content. Of these two, only Diana had begun to sense that she was beginning to recover her childhood faith:

Interviewer: and so does this do anything for you in terms of your faith, or=
Diana: =Yes, it makes me (feel) a bit more interested in it again.

With the exception of Diana’s tentative reconsideration of faith, these parents
Results

formed a marked contrast to the other adult and teenage participants, all of whom described a process in which a Christian identity is forged or developed in relation to participation in a worshipping faith community. Even some of the children of those parents who saw messy church as service-provision had begun to perceive things differently: a sign, perhaps, of the effect of their inclusion in the worshipping community. Tanya was quite clear that she did not think of FE (Messy Church)2 ‘as a church’ but ‘as an activity’. Her ten-year-old daughter Daisy, however, commented that ‘it’s like a big community’; enjoyed ‘Oliver ((the leader)) teaching about being a Christian’; and astutely observed that ‘it doesn’t feel like church so people learn without realizing it’. When Sonya and Deborah’s children were asked what they liked about FE (Messy Church)1, most identified the activities, friends and food. Eight-year-old Poppy, however, had begun to see something else:

Interviewer: =Ok. So there’s friends and making things. Anything else?
Daphne: The cakes.
Interviewer: The cakes. That sounds good.
Poppy: God.
Interviewer: God? [Ok. Who said that?
Poppy: [And Jesus.
Sonya: [Poppy.
Poppy: [Me.=

For a minority of adult participants, then, the motivation to keep attending appears to be a fairly simple perception of benefit with no reciprocal sense of responsibility. Most of these made it clear that attendance will cease if the benefits cease, if there is a greater benefit being elsewhere or if family responsibilities demand it.

By contrast, the gradual process of forging a new identity as a member of a Christian community involves a complex interplay of associated factors that often serve to qualify a simple desire for particular benefits. This is, perhaps, best exemplified by those whose initial motivation to keep attending was primarily a time-specific benefit. Three sets of parents wanted children baptized and two sets of parents wanted their children to qualify for a Church
Results

of England secondary school. If the sole motivation for their attendance was to achieve the perceived benefit, it might have been expected that, once these objectives had been achieved, the parents would cease to attend. As all these adults are now committed members of their churches, other factors clearly had a mitigating effect upon the initial motivation. It might have been that contact with the Christian community merely served to offer a greater array of benefits than was first perceived and which subsequently also became desirable. However, participant accounts contained considerable evidence that, once involved in a faith community, most participants offered their time and skills to benefit the community in some way. It may be significant, then, that the four parents at messy church services who thought of them as their church were team members helping to run them in some way.

Thirty-four of the fifty-two adult and teenage participants had specific responsibilities within their faith community – the range of roles they mentioned can be seen in Figure 6.9. Of the eighteen who either did not mention or had no current responsibilities, two were just about to take on new responsibilities and one was taking a temporary break from various roles due to having recently given birth. Nine were the messy church parents already mentioned, so that only six of those who saw themselves as members of faith-communities had no specific responsibility. Only one of these was among those who had joined their faith community from somewhere else because they were looking for good child provision; the others who had done this, having made their choice, were prepared to become fully involved and take on increasing responsibility.

Of these fifteen participants who were enjoying the benefits of a faith community without taking on any reciprocal responsibility, thirteen were attending a fresh expression and two were attending a parish church.

Participant opinions

Most of my questions were designed to elicit participants’ perspectives on what had happened or was happening to them. Two questions were of a different order, however, and were designed to probe ideas about altruism and consumerism. The first asked whether they thought that belonging to their church or fresh expression carried any general responsibilities. The second
Results

sought to elicit ideas about any non-negotiable qualities of a faith community by asking whether participants could think of anything that would cause them to choose to leave their church or fresh expression should something change there.

Thirty-five out of the forty-three adults and teenagers who saw themselves as belonging to a faith community responded to the first question. Of these, only one thought that belonging carried no general responsibilities. The others gave three types of response: about personal matters, about the faith community and about people outside the faith community. Some participants gave a range of response; others were limited to one particular type.

Nineteen participants mentioned matters of personal attitude or behaviour. Seven participants thought that personal fulfilment or development was a responsibility, through enjoyment, personal growth and finding a role in which they could flourish. Fifteen participants answered in terms of personal faith, spirituality or morality. A few perceived that a personal faith in God carried the responsibility to believe, worship and become a disciple. The majority, however, referred to issues of personal morality: many mentioned honesty and integrity, but otherwise spoke in the broadest terms about being holy, virtuous, moral, loving, good or nice.

Twenty-one participants thought of the responsibility to support and participate fully in their faith community by helping run its programmes, help care for its members or by helping to maintain the plant in some way. Three participants expressed this as a sense of the duty to ‘give something back’, having themselves benefited from belonging.

Eighteen participants spoke of a responsibility outside the faith community. Of these, fourteen thought of this responsibility in terms of some form of evangelism. Only five thought that belonging to a faith community carried a responsibility for altruism in the wider community.

Thirty adults and teenagers responded to questions about the circumstances under which they might choose to leave. Only four of these could think of no reasons why they would want to leave. All attended parish churches. There were a remarkable number of specific issues mentioned by the remaining twenty-six participants, with little consensus about them apart from the ten who thought they would leave if their faith community was no
Results

longer enjoyable. Otherwise, many responses were to do with the approach of the minister (too authoritarian; poor teaching; not relevant; poor worship; going 'astray'; not child oriented), the community (no sense of community; too demanding; little opportunity for participation; not welcoming; not fitting me) or simple change (any change; minister leaves; being 'called away'; responsibilities to family).

Apart from those who said that they would not leave their churches, there were no significant differences in the pattern of opinions about responsibilities and essential qualities between those attending parish churches and those attending fresh expressions.

Summary

There was clear evidence of self-interest in the selection and enjoyment of certain desirable qualities as a factor in some participants' choice to attend their parish church or fresh expression, and in others' choice to remain at them. The evidence about altruism is less clear. A considerable number of participants thought that belonging implied responsibility and demonstrated practical commitment by taking on particular responsibility within their faith community. However, most of the examples they gave were to do with personal spirituality or with the success of their faith community, as were the actual responsibilities they had taken on. Very few mentioned the wider community except in the context of evangelism. The extent to which self-interest constitutes the influence of consumerism, or taking on responsibility amounts to altruism, and whether either was more prevalent at the fresh expressions than the parish churches, will be discussed in the next chapter.

A new theoretical model: The Transformative Cycle

A wide variety of transformative factors has emerged from multiple participant accounts of their transition into committed members of parish churches or fresh expressions. There are also, however, a few key common experiences that have emerged as core concepts that clarify the function of individual factors:
Results

1. Some of these factors concern participants’ self-perception.
2. Some are functions of a particular faith community.
3. Some are to do with the internalization of Christian tradition.

Organized in this way, the relationship of the transformative factors to one another can be illustrated most clearly by the use of a Venn diagram:

![Figure 6.10 Transformative factors: relationship](image)

This diagram is static, however. It begins to portray the relationship between factors, but fails to convey process. The concepts and factors also relate to one another in a direction of travel, indicated by the simple addition of arrows:
For example, Richard experienced a challenge to his self-perception through a bereavement life-change event that raised questions of existential contingency. A known person, the curate at PC5, invited him to a house group at his faith community. He meets others, asks his questions and begins to hear teaching from Christian tradition. These answers cause him to begin to adjust his self-perception.

In fact, the arrows denote not a single turn of the circle, but a continual cycle that, with each pass, reinforces a gradual process of transformation in the way in which the participants perceive their identities:
Not every factor is active during any given pass of the cycle; indeed some represent the gradual strengthening of a prior but related factor: for example, Welcome → Social Interaction → Friendship. It is also clear from participant accounts that the amount of reinforcement necessary to achieve transformation of identity differs according to individual circumstances. Someone with no church background, for example, will need many more turns of the circle than a churchgoer who relocates from another church.

The model is perhaps best illustrated by two case studies; one is from a fresh expression, the other from a parish church.

**Case Study 1: Neville**

Neville's marriage had broken up and he had started to drink so that, two years before the interview, he 'used to be sitting outside here with a load of lager louts and cider louts drinking, 'cause bored'. The public bench where he and others gathered was outside St. T's church, which hosts FE (Café Service) 2, and the minister, Ronan, occasionally talked to them and invited them in. Neville had never been into a church and refused the invitations protesting, 'Nah. Ain't for me; I don't want to know it'. Then a friend who had begun to
attend FE (Café Service) 2 urged him to give it a try:

Neville: There's a lovely chap called Gerry that used to come here. Lovely bloke, weren't he? Brilliant bloke. And he used to like a little slurp and all that and he said, "Neville; not being funny, mate", he said, "end of the day, you're not going nowhere are you?"

It took all Neville's courage to walk in to something completely unknown:

Neville: I tell you, the hardest bit was getting through that front door. [...] Tell you the truth, I was scared. Be honest. I didn't know what to expect. [...] Normally, I'm not being funny, but I'm a bit loud anyway or whatever. But as soon as I walked... when I first came here, I was, like: 'Zippo'; lost my voice and everything and, "Ooh, what's this all about?". It took a good couple of months, I think, before I settled in.

Despite his anxiety, Neville experienced a welcome and friendliness from Ronan and his team through which he began to perceive that he might be someone whose company was desirable:

Neville: I just couldn't believe it. They didn't want nothing out of me. Bar my company. And that was it; nothing else. Just me, my company.

As he kept attending, Neville found the fast-moving, magazine style approach to the 'service' a revelation:

Neville: I think... see, why, perhaps, I didn't ever bother coming, was that, where you ever thought about a church, it was , like, 'serious'. All, like, "rrrrrrr", you know, I mean, that's it, yeah; in your face, and all that, and I thought, "I ca...", cause I didn't have patience with it, I thought it was, "I can't do that". Whereas, you come here, and all that, and it's always a laugh and a bit of banter. And it's... it makes... not makes fun of it, but it makes it easier to take in, if you
Results

like. And it sinks in better, believe it or not.

Gerry became a ‘mentor’ to Neville by introducing him to others and speaking about Christian faith. As other relationships deepened, Neville felt confident enough to volunteer to help others feel welcome by serving coffee and tea. Meanwhile, week by week, the content of the services was making him think about faith. Neville gave up alcohol. The combination made him feel completely different:

Neville: Walk out of here and you’re contented. You’re happy. You’re content. And I think that’s a lovely feeling. You know, you walk away and you got a buzz, ain’t you, sort of thing, I mean, you feel good in yourself. It’s lovely.

A romance flourished with one of the other members, and she and Neville married. They began to take responsibility for serving refreshments together and they share a faith. He still finds ‘certain things in the Bible that are just... yeah, quite hard to work out’ but he finds the questions stimulating: ‘That’s one thing about it; I’m really nosey, me’. He is now a central figure at FE (Café Service) 2, and feels that his personality has been transformed:

Neville: Main thing I’ve got out of this is patience. ’Cause I used to be a walking nightmare. But now I’m just... I’m content, tell you the truth.

Neville now sees himself as a churchgoer. Even if FE (Café Service) 2 was to close, he would attend somewhere else:

Neville: Oh yeah! Yeah, I would find another place, oh yeah, yeah. I wouldn’t just pack up and that would be it.

An analysis of Neville’s story reveals a number of key factors which worked in concert in the process of transforming his identity from a non-churchgoer to a committed church member: significant life change; questions of identity; the influence of known people; an effective minister; welcome by church
members; a vibrant service; understandable teaching; questions about faith; a group in which such questions can be discussed; social interaction; friendship offered by church members; growing belief; lifestyle change; active participation in the life of the church, and taking on specific responsibilities.

Using the Transformative Cycle as an interpretive model, it is clear that some of these factors concerned Neville’s perception of himself; some were functions of FE (Café Service) 2 as a particular faith community, and others were to do with the communication of wider Christian tradition. The Venn diagram can be used to display the relationship of Neville’s particular transformative factors to one another:

![Figure 6.13 Transformative factors: Neville](image-url)

Figure 6.13 Transformative factors: Neville
Results

So, for example, Neville’s marital breakdown and alcoholism create a tension and despair which is addressed by a friend who is a church member. Gerry takes Neville into FE (Café Service) 2 where, despite his anxiety, he finds a genuine welcome and a presentation of the Christian faith which does not repel him. He begins to conceive of himself as desirable company.

At this point, the circle begins to turn again. Neville develops further friendships and volunteers to help. He begins to understand and remember the teaching, and asks questions. He gives up alcohol and considers Christian belief. As the circle once more begins to turn, it reinforces a gradual process of transformation in the way in which Neville comes to perceive his identity.

Case Study 2: Nick and Maggie

Macey was born in 2003 and Nick and Maggie knew that they wanted their daughter to be baptized ‘at quite an early age’. Maggie ‘had been baptized Catholic and then raised in a Baptist church’ and Macey’s birth appears to have triggered a recovery of the importance of her childhood faith in the form of a recognition of a spiritual dimension to her new parental responsibility. From the start, Maggie saw baptism as only the beginning of responsibilities arising from this new fusion of her identity as a mother and her childhood identity as a Christian:

Maggie: I'd originally said, before we'd even gone anywhere to get her baptized that, if I was going to get her baptized, I was going to go to church and bring her up in the church so I'd already made the decision that I was going to continue going. My husband was like, "No, I'll go until we get her baptized", ((laugh)) he said, "and I probably won't go anymore" ((laugh)).

As Maggie was aware, her husband’s perception was rather different. Maggie was clearly the initiator in a search for a church in which Macey could be baptized and brought up, but Nick’s acquiescence was not wholly a matter of pressure from his wife. Although never having been a churchgoer, he saw baptism as a ‘natural’ social custom: desirable in itself but with no consequent obligation to continue attending church. At first sight, then, Nick’s motivation

97
Results

for attending appears to be clear and focused:

Nick: At the time, I was very vocal and very clear that, yeah, well, we'll do whatever we need to do to get her baptized but, after that, you know, this is not for me.

At a deeper level, however, questions of parental responsibility were beginning to be formed:

Nick: Becoming a father really changed my perspective on life. There was that real sort of sense of responsibility that I suddenly had and, you know, I was responsible for, you know, taking these very young people through, you know, through life and being a- not only a support for them but doing everything I can to give them a good basis to sort of really, you know, get going in life.

The family’s first contact with a Roman Catholic church had not met with a positive response from Nick, but Maggie had heard about the parent and toddler group run by PC5 and attended with a friend. She was impressed by the vicar’s approach to taking a Christmas service at the Parent and Toddler group, describing him as charismatic, energetic, good with children and having a sense of humour. Convinced that Noel ‘was the sort of person that my husband would be able to relate to’, she persuaded Nick to attend a Sunday service. She was right:

Nick: I felt comfortable there and I think what was more appealing to me was the approach of the vicar at the time: the way in which he delivered the sermon and delivered the service.

Consequently, after Christmas, they continued to attend PC5 and approached Noel to ask for baptism for Macey. Their experience of the services continued to be positive. Maggie describes them as very welcoming and friendly with good, understandable teaching and a mix of traditional and modern music. Nick recalls a sense of there being a ‘church family’ into which they were being
welcomed; people wanted to get to know them. There were other young families they could relate to with children Macey could play with, and there was vibrant, refreshing, contemporary worship.

Noel explained that the baptism process involved three home visits and Nick was impressed by Noel’s approach to these; he got to know them as a family, identified common interests and listened well. Despite these positive experiences, however, Nick was still not planning to continue attending after the baptism:

Nick: There was a willingness to go along, and we were enjoying it. But I still think, at that stage, for me personally, I still hadn’t, in my mind, made the decision whether it would be something we’d continue. My vision was always to that baptism (and kind of) getting there.

Nevertheless, these experiences were beginning to cause Nick to doubt whether he had the resources to fulfil his new parental responsibilities:

Nick: I guess, having then had this exposure to church, I think I realized maybe what I’d missed out during my childhood. [...] so, for me, it was about, as a father, I can make a choice, along with my wife, to go to a church [...] somewhere where those children would be supported and would be taught enough so that, when they, you know, were able to make their own decisions, they could make those with a solid basis of knowledge which I didn’t have when I became that father.

When, after the baptism, Noel invited them to attend an Alpha course in order to gain a better understanding of Christianity, Nick’s questions about his self-perception as a father developed into more fundamental questions about his core identity.

Nick: I found actually I was asking a lot of questions and, I guess, thinking, "Well ok, I'm a lot wiser now. I'm a father, I've got
Results

responsibilities; perhaps it’s time to go and”, you know, “fully understand it before I make any firm decisions” [...] and I thought, "Actually, I need to fully understand this now. So that, if I have a discussion either way, whether I say, 'No, I'm an atheist' or 'No, I'm going to become a committed Christian' I at least have a firm basis of knowledge to support those decisions”.

They both decided to attend. For Maggie, the Alpha course ‘made sense of things that I'd learned when I was young’ and introduced her to a new experience of the Holy Spirit. Nick appreciated a setting – ‘a nice meal; good company’ – in which there was informative, understandable teaching; encouragement to ask questions, and the opportunity to discuss them. Many more questions were raised as they discussed their reading at home, which were then taken to the following session. Not only were questions being answered, but ‘we came out of Alpha having forged closer relationships with a far-reaching set of people within the church and they'd welcomed us into this family’. Nick and Maggie made a commitment to continue going to PC5.

They continued to enjoy the services. Both mention the relaxed style of the 10.30 service with its lively worship, wide age-range and good, relevant teaching. However, two other factors cemented their place as committed members of PC5. First, the church's provision for children fulfilled everything that both parents were hoping for Macey. Children were welcomed, there was good, in-depth teaching and faith was taught on their level in a relevant way as a basis for future life choices. Macey was having fun, making new relationships and, as she grew older, wanting to be there. They said that she was building a relationship with Jesus, choosing to pray and participating in services with other children by leading prayers, reading, demonstrating action songs or helping to lead them.

Second, as soon as Nick and Maggie chose to continue to attend, they began to participate in the life of the church. They wanted to become involved in this dynamic, new, growing environment and give to others what they had found by using their strengths. They joined a cell group and took on responsibilities, some of which they had been asked to do but for many of which they had volunteered. Together, they supported new families coming to church; helped
Results

with Alpha courses; introduced new people to the church, facilitated marriage courses and became involved in youth work. Nick advised on communications, then joined the PCC, soon becoming its secretary. This involvement bound them even closer to relationships within the church:

Nick:           So, very quickly, we became an integral part of the church and developed strong relationships with pretty much the whole church family and not only as church members but also as good friends. [...] So it became a really huge part of our life, to the point where, actually, we found a shift in our social network or our friends.

Their transition to an identity centred in belonging to a Christian faith community was complete.

As with Neville, an analysis of Nick and Maggie’s story reveals a number of factors which worked together in the process of transformation of their identity from non-churchgoers to committed church members: life change; questions of role and identity; the influence of known people; a church-based community group or event; an effective minister; welcome by church members; vibrant worship; family-oriented services; relevant preaching and teaching about faith; questions about faith and identity; a group in which such questions can be discussed; social interaction; friendship offered by church members; a growing personal faith; active participation in the life of the church, and taking on specific responsibilities.

Again, it is clear that some of these factors concerned Nick and Maggie’s perception of themselves; some were functions of PC5 as a particular faith community, and others were to do with the communication of wider Christian tradition:
Macey’s birth causes Maggie to re-evaluate her identity as a mother and a Christian, expressed in a desire for baptism and a church. A friend invites her to a church-based parent and toddler group where she encounters a minister whose approach and teaching makes her think that he can help both her husband and herself to address their questions.

The circle then begins to turn again. Nick’s questions of parental identity allow him to be taken to a service by his wife where they are both impressed by the welcome, its orientation towards families and the minister’s approach to worship and preaching. They discuss, and agree that here is a church that can help them. As with Neville, the circle once more begins to turn, and it reinforces a gradual process of transformation in the way Maggie and Nick...
Results

perceive their identities.

It is also clear from this case study that the amount of reinforcement necessary to achieve a transformation of identity is different for Maggie and Nick. Maggie's childhood churchgoing experience does not mean that she undergoes a different process from Nick, who has none, in order to inhabit a new identity as a committed member of a Christian faith community. On the contrary, the fundamental process is the same. The difference between them is that Nick's non-churchgoing background means that the transformative cycle must be reinforced more often for him:
Results

Figure 6.15  Transformative factors: Nick and Maggie – a comparison
Results

Children and the Transformative Cycle

The operation of the Transformative Cycle is less clear with young children, although the stories of the teenage participants describe it well. A few children, such as Deirdre (10) at FE(Network) or Briony (11) and Chris (12) at PC3 had experienced a challenge to their self-perception at school through questions raised in RE lessons and assemblies, and school-friends invited them to church.

I: So, Deirdre, your friend; had she talked to you about ‘FE(Network)’?
Deirdre: Yeah, she said it would be a good place and you learn loads at Sunday school.

I: Did that make you want to go?
Deirdre: Yeah. ‘cause at school (we) learned about, like, God, and I didn’t know that much.

I: So she made it sound?...
Deirdre: More easier.

They were socialized very quickly into Sunday school groups and engaged with the Christian tradition:

Chris: The Sunday school ((5-10s)) and the Upper Room ((11-15s)) like, teach you; like, how you choose the right (paths) and teach you more about God and things.
I: What particularly do you like about it?
Chris: Just interacting with all the other kids and what they think about it and about (me). After I had my accident, which (hurt), they were all praying for me and making me feel like they (weren’t forgetting me and things).
I: And Briony? What do you most like?
Briony: =It’s nice doing the all the activities every Sunday with your friends and you have a lot of fun. And you have fun and you’re still learning.
Results

Briony and Chris were recently confirmed having completed a Youth Alpha course.

These children's stories, at least, suggest a clear and somewhat rapid operation of the Transformative Cycle. They are exceptional, however, in that they were the main agents of parental attendance; normally, the reverse was true. It is possible, however, that the Transformative Cycle begins for most children with their introduction by known people (usually parents) to the faith community and that exposure to the Christian tradition in children's groups begins to change their self-perception, which is reinforced as they build relationships and begin to internalize the tradition. Interviews with Criostal and Miriam at PC5 and Derek and Billie at FE(Messy Church)1 suggest that, for the children of churchgoing parents, the process of socialization into Christian belonging is actively reinforced at home, as described by Voas & Storm (2011) and Voas & Crockett (2005). However, children at both Messy churches, such as Poppy (8) at FE(Messy Church)1 and Daisy (10) at FE(Messy Church)2, whose parents do not see themselves as attending a church, clearly understood that they were present in a faith community and expressed some understanding of Christian tradition. It seems likely, therefore, that the process of socialization into Christian belonging can be also facilitated by attendance alone, as argued by Mark Griffiths (2009) and implied by Robin Gill (1999). It is not possible to demonstrate clearly the operation of the Transformative Cycle with these children, however.

Questions of validity and generalization

The validity of this theoretical model is supported by a number of factors. First, it directly addresses the primary qualitative research question:

What theory might explain the process of starting and continuing to attend fresh expressions or parish churches for parents, children and those with no prior churchgoing background?

Second, the sample base from which it emerged included all the constituents defined in the research question: parents, children and the unchurched from both fresh expressions and parish churches. Third, the qualitative research sub-questions and interview questions were designed to elicit exactly the data
Results

required to answer the primary research question. Finally, the data concerning process was allowed to redefine the content of analytical categories and their relationship to one another as it emerged. Therefore, what has been measured is what was said would be measured, and it has been measured rigorously and carefully according to the methods described.

A claim to the more general applicability of the Transformative Cycle is made, first, from its validity. Second, however, it has emerged not only from a range of different contexts, but also from a range of different kinds of context. It applies in fresh expressions and parish churches; it applies in rural and suburban areas; it applies in economically advantaged and disadvantaged contexts; it applies in a variety of theological and liturgical traditions; it applies to people of different age, gender, relationship status, churchgoing background and socio-economic background. Third, I have considered instances in which the model appeared either to be not operating or ceasing to operate. Most parents attending Messy churches are not experiencing a transformation of their identity into one who belongs to a Christian faith community. I have argued, however, that the challenge to parental self-perception which having children provokes has been quickly resolved by the provision of a supportive, enjoyable, safe environment in which they can socialize and develop skills. I have also argued that the Messy church teams have not successfully involved them in either the relationships of the faith community or the Christian tradition of the worship. Without mutually reinforcing changes to self-perception, community and tradition, the Transformative Cycle cannot turn.

I have also noted that Nick and Maggie were the only two participants who, having identified strongly with the internal culture of their congregation for some years, are now beginning to experience tensions between the continuing development of their own Christian identity and the distinct identity of their church. As Nick put it, ‘to some extent I feel I’m outgrowing my church’. Having undergone a process in which their identities were transformed to that of committed Christian members of PC5, they are now experiencing another shift in identity, not away from Christian faith, but away from the particularity of commitment to and identification with PC5. It may be significant that they have been increasingly influenced by a somewhat
different Christian tradition in which Nick is employed. Perhaps, where the transformative cycle turns under the influence of sources beyond the faith-community, it may be able to describe the way in which church members not only join churches, but also leave them after experiencing an increasing dissonance in relation to their congregational culture.

It is also important to note that the adult and teenage participants reflect only two of three possible experiences after an initial encounter with a congregational culture. Most had experienced the transformation of their identity into one who belongs to a Christian faith community. Those at Messy churches or who had only recently encountered a faith community had not experienced such transformation, yet could still do so. It was not possible, however, to interview those for whom it had begun to turn but who had left before any transformation of identity could occur. Mike referred to some of those who had experienced the same kind of initial spiritual encounter that had meant so much to him:

Mike: There was a lot of people that just drifted away. And that’s... with Tony I could never understand it because he had the same experience that I had and yet it’s dissipated where it’s kept me going for thirty-two years.

Although I was not able to interview anyone who had experienced this, Francis & Richter’s detailed study of church leavers (2007) suggest that numerous factors have the potential to halt the Transformative Cycle. Many are in the power of local churches to control, and are to do with congregational culture or pastoral awareness, but others arise from further personal life change.

Finally, the Transformative Cycle can only partially be inferred from the description of children of their experience of belonging to a faith community. The theoretical model of the Transformative Cycle may be able to explain even these exceptions; certainly, it is not disproved by them, and it remains the most consistent and plausible explanation for the processes described by all those adult and teenage participants who finally became committed members of their faith communities.
Results

Summary

The Transformative Cycle is a theoretical model that has emerged from the data itself and describes the process by which participants have been transformed into committed members of a particular faith community. It is capable of explaining how seemingly disparate factors function within a coherent process of change. Because the core concepts of self-perception, faith community and Christian tradition apply to all participants who have become committed members of a particular faith community, it is also capable of clarifying the process in relation to the background, circumstances and events unique to any particular participant who has made that change. It may also be capable of describing the initial experiences of those few participants who have not become committed members of a faith community and, perhaps, predicting the next stage in the transformational process should they go on to become such members.

There is no evidence that this process of the transformation of identity is any different for those attending parish churches compared to those attending fresh expressions. It would appear, however, that the process functions less effectively at the two messy churches.

Conclusion

Quantitative data has been used in two ways. Attendance data and my questionnaires indicated that the fresh expressions achieved a higher incidence of child attendance than the parish churches, but that there was no difference in their relative ability to attract those without a churchgoing background. Quantitative measures have also been derived from the qualitative data in order to show the relative strength of responses and to identify common factors and their exceptions.

The main burden of the qualitative analysis has been to reveal process, however. A number of underlying factors have been shown to operate together in the process by which a new identity as a committed member of a faith community is formed, although the extent to which this has been influenced by consumerism is less clear.
Results

A coherent and grounded theory, The Transformative Cycle, has emerged from the data, which is capable of interpreting in detail most participants' accounts of their involvement with their faith-communities. Exceptions are those at messy churches who do not view them as church, and those who have only recently begun to attend. The Transformative Cycle offers a reasonable explanation even of these cases, however. It seems clear that the process described by this theory operates in the same way and with similar effectiveness in both the participating parish churches and the fresh expressions, with the exception of the messy churches.
4 DISCUSSION

My quantitative analysis of data from social attitudes and values surveys clearly demonstrates the effects of the relative inability of the British Church to attract either children or those with no child churchgoing experience. An acute decline in child attendance over several decades has led to a steady increase in the proportion of the British population with no churchgoing background. Should this proportion continue to grow, therefore, adult church attendance in Britain will continue to decrease. If the Church's traditional mission strategies do not change, by 2050 church attenders will form an elderly and rapidly shrinking minority of the British population whose resources are likely to be focused on preserving empty buildings rather than mission.

Children

There are signs, however, that traditional mission strategies are beginning to change with regard to children. Midweek child attendance in the Church of England has steadily increased during the past decade, although not yet to the point where it offsets Sunday child attendance decline. During this period, there have been an increasing number of creative initiatives designed to attract children and families and help socialize them into worshipping congregations. A recent report by the Church of England's Education Division focuses on wider issues of justice development and well-being for children, as well as the calling ‘to work towards every child and young person having a life-enhancing encounter with the Christian faith and the person of Jesus Christ’ (Archbishops' Council 2010: 14). However, its many examples of church, community and schools-based projects tend to be clubs and activities rather than initiatives to help socialize children into worshipping faith communities.

Such initiatives do exist. From a survey of four UK denominations and two para-church networks, Griffiths found that ‘a large percentage of the Children’s Outreach Projects in the UK owe their existence... to the influence of Bill Wilson and the Metro Sunday School pattern’ (2009: 62). Metro Ministries is a
Discussion

theologically conservative evangelical organization\(^3\) that has seen extraordinary success with their children’s outreach clubs for ‘children who live in some of the poorest conditions in New York City’ (Griffiths 2009: 62). Their approach includes ‘games, songs, stories and Bible lessons’ in a highly competitive and disciplined environment with rewards and sanctions, in the form of a point score, leading to prizes (Griffiths 2009: 61). Griffiths’ claim for the ubiquity of the influence of Metro Ministries in the UK should be treated with caution, however. Only 127 of his 1,600 survey questionnaires were returned (8 per cent) and its attraction seems likely to be confined to theologically conservative churches; the final sample for his qualitative work was entirely Pentecostal in theology, as is the one fresh expression in the Diocese of Canterbury that uses this approach.

A more pervasive influence in the Church of England has been Jerome Berryman’s ‘Godly Play’ approach (1991). Based on Montessori’s educational theory and practice, it is designed to help children ‘learn how to wonder in religious education so they can “enter” religious language rather than merely repeat it or talk about it’ (1991: 60). Berryman found that ‘the primary goal, the child’s encounter with God, can be achieved only indirectly’ as it is mediated through story and creative play (1991: 60). His practical handbook (Berryman 1995) and subsequent resource material has enabled many Church of England churches of various traditions to develop an interactive, rather than didactic, approach with their children’s groups.\(^4\) It is ‘Messy Church’, however, which has burgeoned within the Church of England over the last five years. Pioneered by Lucy Moore in 2004, the 2011 reprint of her book (2006) estimates that ‘some 100,000 people’ belong to 977 registered Messy Churches, of which ‘the majority are Church of England’ (2011, 2006: 1). Moore is ‘an accredited Godly Play teacher’ and reports that ‘the underlying values behind Godly Play were hugely influential’ in first developing Messy Church,

\(^3\) Metro Ministries ‘doctrinal statement’ can be found at http://www.metroministries.org/about-us/statement-of-faith/ [Accessed 1 December 2011].

Discussion

in the idea of not providing 'closed' activities with a set answer / result and that people (including children) can go on their own spiritual journey of discovery within a faith framework without a leader dictating what they will learn. Also that story is powerful. Other themes (like community, individual discovery, being free to doubt or not know, or play to find God) are all echoes of Godly Play thinking (BRF 2011: para. 2 of 5; Moore 2011).

She builds on this creative, interactive method to produce an approach that aims to be 'a bridge between people on the messy edges of the church and a relationship with Jesus and with his family of believers' (Moore 2006: 37). Moore conceives Messy Church as a monthly, midweek, all-age event which will be Christ-centred, creative and hospitable to those for whom Sunday worship is alien and which will become a 'worshipping community in its own right' rather than 'a mere feeder into Sunday church' (Moore 2006: 35). She suggests a simple structure of

- Welcome, refreshments, social interaction and children's activities (30 minutes);
- all-age craft activities based on a specific theme (1 hour);
- a simple, participative act of worship using songs, a story and prayer (15 minutes);
- a hot meal together (45 minutes).

Moore's expectation that Messy churches will become sustainable long-term worshipping communities in their own right seems somewhat doubtful, for a number of reasons. Her initial argument for their importance is that the needs of those who have a well-established faith are very different from those who are beginning to explore faith. If Messy Church is designed to meet the needs of the latter, it is difficult to see how, if it is successful, those who are growing in faith will continue to be satisfied by its minimal Christian content; it seems inevitable that it will function, in practice, 'as a halfway house to Sundays' (Moore 2006: 19). Second, Messy churches are resource intensive and need both finance and the time and skills of a committed team; it is hard to see how
they could become anything other than a mission initiative dependent upon existing churches. Third, the model is simple and effective and, while many are cast as fresh expressions, many others are run by parish churches as part of the rich complexity of their ministry to their local community.

Finally, the two Messy churches among my sample did not function in the same way as other worshipping faith communities. The adult participants who were not members of the organizing team did not consider themselves to be attending a church, despite the name and the overt Christian content; they all thought of Messy Church as community service-provision rather than church. Consequently, they neither participated in the worship activities nor did they appear to be building relationships within the Christian community running the service. By contrast, the children of non-team members participated in worship and were developing relationships with other children from a churchgoing background, and talked spontaneously of God or faith. In my research project, questions of self-perception, the internalization of Christian tradition and participation in a Christian community were all essential elements in the process of constructing a new Christian identity. Whether the failure by the Messy churches to facilitate this process for adults is typical of the movement generally is unknown, but it seems likely that the general approach will tend to resonate more with children than with adults. The questions of parental self-perception that may have been instrumental in the choice by adults to attend seem to be quickly resolved as they see their children happy and involved; the cycle of transformation does not turn for them.

None of this, however, detracts from the immense strategic importance of the ability of the Messy Church movement to attract children and socialize them into a Christian faith community. Given its explosive expansion in the Church of England since 2004, it seems likely that Messy churches run by parish churches will have been a major contributor to the steady rise in midweek child attendance over the last few years. In my sample of congregations, the two Messy churches were 60 per cent more effective than even the two parish churches with the fastest growing rate of child attendance in the diocese at attracting a higher ratio of children to adults. The effect of the Messy Church movement on future adult attendance may therefore be highly
Discussion

significant, in that the continuing general inability of churches to attract those with no childhood experience of church means that the survival of the Church depends upon an increasing number of children receiving that experience. It may be that Messy churches will have a similar effect in the twenty-first century to that of Sunday schools in the nineteenth. Indeed, there appear to be some intriguing parallels between the beginning of the Sunday School movement and the beginning of the Messy Church movement. Both were pilot projects carried out in a parish church that built upon previous experiments in the Christian education of children but adapted them to be used with those from non-churchgoing households. Both used particular educational practices to mediate Christian learning and facilitate spiritual encounter; Raikes used catechesis and Moore used Montessori. Both founders developed a standardized approach and promoted it through publication, allowing it to be easily and quickly adapted to other contexts. Both approaches caught the imagination of the Church of their day and rapidly expanded into movements within a very few years. It is uncertain whether the Messy Church movement will continue to expand in the way that the Sunday school movement did, and there are undoubtedly many other initiatives that are contributing to the increasing midweek socialization of children into Christian faith communities. Nevertheless, given the bleak outlook predicted by present attendance patterns, Messy Church is a major sign and carrier of hope for the future for the Church in Britain.

The unchurched

There has been no evidence so far that fresh expressions are generally any more successful than parish churches at attracting those with no churchgoing experience as children. In Stone’s survey (2010), 95 per cent of attenders at fresh expressions had prior churchgoing experience, a finding that correlates well with general British attendance trends. In my sample of congregations, however, four out of the six fresh expressions demonstrated a higher proportion of attendance by those with no child churchgoing background than the 8 per cent found in the BSA/EVS combined results for 2008, indicating that they are more effective in this regard than most parish churches. Nevertheless, three of the five parish churches also showed a significantly higher proportion
of attendance by the previously unchurched than the norm. It would appear that growing parish churches may be more effective at attracting the unchurched than parish churches with attendance decline or stasis. Among my sample, then, the fresh expressions were neither more nor less likely to attract the unchurched than the parish churches.

The qualitative evidence from participant interviews suggests an underlying reason why some growing churches are better able to attract the unchurched. The process by which those who are now committed members of their churches had assumed a new identity as one who belongs to a Christian faith community was the same whether they had recently attended another church, attended another church in the distant past or never attended another church. All underwent a process in which the dynamic interplay of changes to self-perception, encounter with Christian community and engagement with Christian tradition mediated a transformation of identity. The difference between the three categories of prior attendance experience was the time it had taken to complete the process. For churchgoers who moved house, the process was rapid; Criostal and Miriam, for example, resolved the tension caused by their loss of church belonging by quickly finding another church with a tradition that inspired them and which offered friendship for all family members. For those who had attended in the distant past, the process took longer; Maggie needed the intermediary step of a parent-toddler group, a warm welcome and help to recover and deepen her childhood faith. For those with no prior attendance, the process took a great deal of time; it took a profound life-change and a trusting relationship with a church member for Neville to overcome his anxieties and allow himself to be gradually socialized into a faith-community, and even longer to understand and begin to internalize their interpretation of the Christian tradition. It takes a little time for even a churchgoer to begin to feel they belong to a new church, but it is relatively easy compared to the amount of change that non-churchgoers must experience. It therefore seems likely that the extent to which the values, priorities, strategies and attitudes that facilitate this process have become an integral part of the congregational culture will determine the ease with which new members join and, therefore, will correlate with attendance growth. A church that enables the process for the unchurched will also attract the lapsed,
Discussion

although the reverse may not be true; two of the growing parish churches in my sample mainly attracted those with past churchgoing experience. The extent to which the fresh expressions are growing is uncertain. FE(Network) made membership data from 1998 available and FE(Youth) provided attendance data from September 2004 onwards; however, attendance data for the other fresh expressions were not available. Given the significance of the immense throughput at FE(Network) and FE(Youth) reported in Chapter 5, however, it is clear that these congregations, at least, have been successfully attracting and socializing new members into their congregation, even in the years during which FE(Youth) reported a slight loss.

The Transformative Cycle

The Transformative Cycle offers a theoretical explanation for the process by which both fresh expressions and parish churches have enabled new members to belong. I have argued for its validity and generalizability in Chapter 6 solely with reference to my qualitative research methods; however, the model also incorporates and combines many of the disparate factors that other studies have identified as correlating with congregational health and growth.\(^5\) First, Gill (2002, 1999) and Finney (1992) identify the central role of significant life change in raising questions of self-perception as a common starting point for those who eventually join churches. There was only one clear exception to this pattern among forty-three adult participants.


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\(^5\) These studies are reviewed in detail in the Full Report.
importance of welcome in the initial incorporation of new members into a congregation. In each of the churches in which the Transformative Cycle functioned successfully, there was a strong congregational culture of care for others that members had internalized and from which they operated instinctively, even outside of the congregation. When they encountered colleagues, neighbours, friends or family who had undergone significant life change, they invited them to a church service or group. When newcomers arrived at such services or groups, they were made welcome and were quickly incorporated into existing relationship networks.

Third, Putnam & Campbell (2010), Francis & Richter (2007), Warren (2004), Gill (1999), Richter & Francis (1998), Wakefield (1998) and Finney (1992) show the importance of engagement with the Christian tradition in forming and sustaining the new moral values, priorities and ethical behaviour fundamental to a distinctive Christian identity. Supportive relationships alone were not sufficient to mediate the transition of participants to an identity as one who belongs to a Christian faith community. The questions raised by life changes were only able to be resolved in this way as they probed, and were answered by, that community’s interpretation of the Christian tradition in its worship and teaching. However, Putnam & Campbell’s findings imply a qualification to Gill’s emphasis on the role of the Christian content of worship in sustaining a distinctive Christian identity. They suggest that ‘religious friends are more likely to raise moral issues, principles and obligations than friends from a non-religious context’ and that ‘connecting with such people tends to evoke peer pressure for you to do good deeds as well’ (Putnam & Campbell 2010: 477). It was certainly clear from my findings that the Christian nature of the community and its tradition are mutually reinforcing.

Fourth, Putnam & Campbell (2010), Francis & Richter (2007), Schwartz (2006), Warren (2004), Cameron & Escott (2002), Jackson (2002), Revell (2000), Gill (1999), Richter & Francis (1998) and Gerald Wilson et al. (1993) offer evidence for the centrality of deepening relationships and the assumption of responsibility in completing and sustaining church belonging. All participants enjoyed the social interaction at services or groups, and all those who saw themselves as members of their churches spoke of gradually deepening relationships as they were socialized into their congregation. Many
found that small discussion groups helped this process, although informal friendships and being members of task-oriented teams were also significant. Taking on a particular role was itself an important dimension of belonging; of the forty-three adult and teenage participants who saw themselves as members of faith communities, only six had not taken on any responsibility within their congregation. Such responsibilities were seen as both an appropriate commitment to their faith community and a dimension of Christian discipleship; the altruistic contribution of time and skills, and its recognition or appreciation by others, seemed to enhance these participants’ sense of significance and embed their new-found Christian identity more firmly.

Ministers

Apart from the Messy churches, the ministers of the participant faith communities nurtured a congregational culture in which the transformation of identity is facilitated well. These ministers are very different from each other in personality, experience, and theological or liturgical tradition. They also have different ministry skills; for example, participants at PC5 particularly commented on Noel’s preaching, while teenagers at FE(Youth) remarked on Steve’s organizational skills. There were, however, three related factors that they had in common. First, all of them were said by their church members to be approachable, friendly, caring and good listeners. Whatever else they did, they gave time to being with people, and they were easy to be with. Second, they all had a collegiate approach to ministry in which church members were positively encouraged to contribute their skills by taking responsibility for a whole range of aspects of congregational life and ministry. Third, all of them worked to develop an existing congregational culture rather than impose an entirely different model of ministry. What they added was unique, but they took their congregations on a gradual process of change within an existing tradition rather than imposing a different one. This is true even of ministers at fresh expressions: Liam planted FE(Network) from another congregation; Steve was the second Youth Pastor at FE(Youth); Frank was the second leader of FE(Café Service)1, and Ronan developed FE(Café Service)2 from an existing outreach initiative. Chambers (2004) demonstrated the devastating effect that
Discussion

the attempt to pose an entirely different congregational culture can have, while Edgell Becker (1999) showed how a clash between different congregational models of ministry can lead to irreconcilable conflict. Yet Howe (2005), Jackson (2005) and Warren (2004) stress the importance of successful management of change to attendance growth. Schwadel (2005) and Olson (1989) demonstrate how a balance between internal and external relationships also tends to correlate with attendance growth. The ministers in my sample seem to have been extraordinarily successful at negotiating gradual change in the culture of their congregations to the point at which there is a general and genuine awareness of and openness to the needs of non-members, as well as real care and friendship among the faith community itself.

Consumerism

The relationship between altruism and consumerism among the participants requires some exploration and clarification. What consumer attitudes there were among my participants bore little relationship to the to the argument of some fresh expressions theorists that, in contemporary Western culture, social identity is created and sustained through acts of consumption and that, therefore, the commodification of religion as a conscious strategy is more likely to mediate an authentic engagement with the Christian tradition. While all of my participants could speak of aspects of their church's life that they enjoyed, none had joined them primarily in order to indulge such enjoyment. Parents’ primary motivation, for example, was the happiness and well-being of their children even if, once they were sure that would be fulfilled, a few also looked for a particular style of worship which they enjoyed.

Non-parents with no prior churchgoing experience were seeking to resolve deep-seated existential questions triggered by significant life events, not to find spiritual commodities to consume. It is true that some participants spoke of encountering God in worship, particularly charismatic or Anglo-Catholic worship, but they tended to speak of such worship as an intense expression of a sense of God which permeated all of life and which was sustained by many practices, not as something experienced in a moment of consumption. Enjoyment was seen as legitimate, for the very desire to worship was viewed as a sign of devotion to God, not as a means of indulging the self. Nick used
language about ‘feeding’, which might be thought to symbolize consumption perfectly:

Nick: As a church, you know, you do need to be able to try and share that workload and ensure that, actually, those maturing Christians are still being fed. We’re very good at feeding the new people... because of the nature of my work, I am fed on a daily basis.

However, even this was not really about consumerism, about the self for self’s sake, but about the duty to God to mature as a Christian.

Not only did most participants carry out duties within their church, only one thought that belonging to a faith community carried no general ethical responsibilities to be caring, loving and virtuous. It is true that twenty-six adults and teenagers could conceive of reasons why they might choose to leave their church should the congregational culture change, but few concerned personal taste; most responses were to do with the potential failure of the church to fulfil their idea of an authentic Christian community. Furthermore, any sense of enjoyment was inextricably bound up with responsibility. The distinction between choice and obligation was blurred for these participants and is perhaps best summed up by the Westminster Shorter Catechism that their ‘chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever’ (Boyd 1856: 19). Worship was enjoyed as a corporate activity in which one gave to God and others; small groups or friendships were enjoyed as arenas of reciprocal care giving; responsibilities were enjoyed as an opportunity to benefit others and to be appreciated. Satisfaction and a sense of significance, then, were primarily defined in relation to others: from being good parents, good friends and good Christians. Choice and consumption in churchgoing were not primarily about consumerism, but about expressing devotion by investing relationships with a transcendent significance through sacrifice, expressing altruism and love through provision for those who participate in those relationships and expressing the desire for significance as others want and appreciate what is given. It is all this, rather than the act of religious consumption itself, which contributes to the construction of Christian identity.


Discussion

Fresh expressions

The sociological evidence offered by my mixed-methods results suggests that fresh expressions do not necessarily demonstrate any difference from parish churches in either the ability to attract the unchurched or the process by which new members are socialized into congregations. However, the detail and nuance of my examination of the data has revealed two important ways in which fresh expressions represent a vital socio-theological corrective to traditional approaches to mission.

First, some forms of church that have enabled successful mission are not possible within a traditional church setting. The Messy churches proved significantly more successful at attracting a higher percentage of children than even those parish churches with a special focus upon children and families. FE(Café Service)2 has successfully attracted people who would not attend a traditional service, and who have needed a carefully tailored pastoral and liturgical approach to help them sufficiently overcome their anxieties to attend. A parish church cannot organize itself around the particular needs of puberty in the way that FE(Youth) has been able. While close relationships within the congregation were important in all the churches, only FE(Network) has made them the heart of their life and mission, leading to an extraordinary number of new members joining cells. Fresh expressions can demonstrate a flexibility with regard to liturgy, structure and the deployment of lay leaders which is not possible in most traditional church settings, and which allows them to respond more radically to mission context. Therefore, while the parish churches have also grown, and the processes by which new members come to belong are the same, the fresh expressions have attracted people who would have been unlikely to form a Christian identity within a parish church. For these people, the claim that fresh expressions are a necessary complement to the parochial system has undoubtedly been proved true.

Second, all the parish churches acted like fresh expressions in one important way. All practised inculturation as they allowed social context to shape their congregational life, mission and even liturgical practices. The idea of inculturation in Mission-shaped Church is the application of the principle of
Discussion

the incarnation of the gospel within a context in which the gospel is not yet known. It is a 'three-way conversation' between the

historic gospel, uniquely revealed in Holy Scripture and embodied in the Catholic creeds; the Church, which is engaging in mission, with its own particular culture and history, (and) the culture within which the gospel is being shared (Archbishops' Council 2009: 91).

In the context of chronic general attendance decline in Britain over the last one hundred and fifty years, and the probable collapse of the Church in the next fifty should it continue as it is, it seems likely that the faithful transmission of the inherited tradition within parish churches will peter out if that is all that the Church relies on. Studies by Voas & Storm (2011), Lynch (2005) Gill (2003, 2002, 1999) and Revell (2000) all provide evidence of the increasing disconnection between traditional religious culture and the general surrounding culture. If the Church is to survive, it must make new connections or renew old ones; in either case, the concept of inculturation has much to commend it because it does not need to be applied only to the planting of new churches. It may be highly significant that, among my sample of congregations, the parish churches were as adept as the fresh expressions at allowing their ministry and congregational culture to be shaped by local culture as well as their liturgical and theological tradition. The isolated rural settings of PC1 and PC3 allowed PC1 to develop a local association that has become the principle means of relating socially for everyone in their parish, while PC3 has become a primary forum through which parents address their children's limited educational and social options. PC2 has grown through the social connections mediated by the church school and the village pub. PC4 has become the principle resource for helping families socialize with one another and providing children's activities in their area. PC5, in the heart of a large town, acts as a network church in its proliferation of social groups in the areas in which members live and the children's service-provision groups to which parents invite their friends. All have practised inculturation, and their distinctive identity has been shaped by it; but all are growing through the social connections that they have generated, without which the
Discussion

Transformative Cycle could not function.

It seems likely, then, that the higher than average attendance growth demonstrated by these parish churches, and the higher than average attendance percentage of the unchurched in most of them, is linked to the implementation of a central dimension of fresh expressions praxis, whether there was any awareness of doing so or not. Mission-shaped Church has been the catalyst for a thoroughgoing re-evaluation of mission practice in a parish church context, inspiring numerous publications designed to help parishes apply some of its approaches in a traditional setting (e.g. Croft 2008, 2006; Bayes et al. 2006; Bayes 2004). Both Café services were initiatives of parish churches and, in the Diocese of Canterbury at least, an increasing number of parish churches are developing Café services and Messy church services, not as fresh expressions, but as part of the variety of worship that they offer. In Chapter 1, I referred to numerous examples of initiatives called ‘fresh expressions’ which clearly were not discrete faith communities, but a dimension of parish mission. In these ways, fresh expressions theory and praxis have begun to influence the Church of England and has the potential to continue to do so.

Third, there are other important similarities that the parish churches and the non-Messy church fresh expressions demonstrated that has a resonance with, but not a necessary dependence upon, fresh expressions theory and praxis. Their ministers tend to employ a collegiate approach, each has a distinctive congregational culture owned by its members, there is a good balance between bridging and bonding social capital, members invite newcomers who are welcomed and integrated into the faith community, the Christian tradition is communicated well and members derive satisfaction from their discipleship. All these characteristics are vital for the Transformative Cycle to be effective in developing new members of the faith community. None is necessarily connected with fresh expressions and, as Stone’s study (2010) indicates, particular fresh expressions may be as liable to focus on bonding rather than bridging as parish churches. These characteristics do fit well with fresh expressions theory, however, and it may be that churches that are in the process of evaluating their congregational life and mission using insights from fresh expressions and ‘mission-shaped’
Discussion

literature may attend more consciously to them than churches that are not. Therefore, even if the planting of a fresh expression is not always, or even usually, the appropriate mission strategy, the ‘living principle’ at the heart of fresh expressions theory, despite the many flaws in its argument, has the capacity to help reinvigorate the Church as a whole.
## 5 CONCLUSION

### Research outcomes

First, I offer a quantitative model that demonstrates the relationship between child church attendance decline, the rising proportion of those with no churchgoing experience in the general population and general trends of church attendance decline. The model is capable of analysing attendance trends by age group or cohort, and of making projections. Second, I offer a cross-contextual qualitative model that explains the process by which adults and teenagers are socialized into faith communities, irrespective of churchgoing background or whether the congregation is a fresh expression or parish church.

### Attendance patterns: analysis and projection

In the context of chronic general and acute child Sunday attendance decline, the dependence of religious affiliation, beliefs and attendance on their effective transmission across generations is of central importance. It implies that a decreasing number of children in church will, over time, result in fewer adults with a childhood experience of church to return to which, in turn, will reinforce the cycle of decline in each generation. If this is so, the general claim that fresh expressions are necessary because of the failure of traditional churches to halt attendance decline will be substantiated only by evidence that they are better able to attract children or the unchurched, or both. Therefore, my research design was dependent upon an accurate understanding of the relationship between past and present patterns of attendance and the extent to which the proportion of those with no childhood churchgoing experience are growing.

Using data from British Social Attitudes (BSA) and European Values Study (EVS) surveys I was able to calculate:

- the percentage of those who had never attended as children as a proportion of all church attenders in the years 1991, 1998, 1999/2000 and 2008;
Conclusion

- the percentages of regular church attenders, occasional church attenders, lapsed church attenders and non-attenders either in the present or as children as a proportion of the British population in the years 1991, 1998, 1999/2000 and 2008, and the trends over time between these fixed points;
- a projection of these trends in ten-year intervals between 2010 and 2050 by applying rates of child attendance decline over sixteen years to particular age cohorts in combined BSA and EVS data for 2008.

The results demonstrated conclusively that:

- the proportion of church attenders who had never attended church as children has remained steady at 7-8 per cent since 1998;
- if this proportion and trends of child attendance decline remain constant,
  - the proportion of the British population who are non-attenders either as adults or children will have risen from 27 per cent in 2010 to 62 per cent in 2050;
  - the proportion of the British population who attend at least monthly will have decreased from 13 per cent in 2010 to 7 per cent 2050, and that their age distribution will have increased significantly.

These findings suggest that, unless present mission strategy changes to more effectively attract children, the unchurched or both, church attendance will continue to decline to the point at which it will become irreversible. There are limitations to these findings: they do not take the effect of child midweek attendance into account, and the Church of England reports a significant rise in child midweek attendance from 2001. This has not been sufficient to offset child Sunday attendance decline but, if this is a national trend, it may be enough to attenuate projected decline, although not halt it. Nevertheless, the implications for fresh expressions are clear. If their distinctive contribution is to help reverse declining church attendance, they must demonstrate the capacity to be more effective than traditional churches at attracting children or the unchurched, or both. This capacity, therefore, becomes the focus for my
Conclusion

evaluation of their praxis.

**A mixed-methods comparative study**

I have established that there are exceptions to general trends of attendance decline in the traditional churches of the Church of England. Cathedral attendance, midweek child attendance, overall attendance in the Diocese of London and Sunday attendance in particular parishes are rising. It also seems likely that such attendance growth is linked to particular congregational characteristics and strategies. It is uncertain, however, whether such pockets of growth conform to the general tendency to rely on adults returning to a childhood experience of church, or form an exception to it. Since the generally low attendance by children and those with no child churchgoing background may be unequally distributed, it is possible that it is particularly associated with growing churches. If so, then the capacity to reverse attendance decline lies in adoption of the congregational characteristics and strategies that promote it. Therefore, my research was designed to investigate the relative capacity of fresh expressions and growing parish churches in the Diocese of Canterbury to socialize both children and unchurched adults into their congregational life. I chose a mixed-methods approach in order to test the incidence of attendance against national norms and investigate the processes by which socialization occurs among a sample of six fresh expressions and five growing parish churches. I framed the mixed-methods research question as:

To what extent and in what ways do qualitative data arising from fresh expressions and growing parish churches in the Diocese of Canterbury give a comprehensive and nuanced explanation of the processes responsible for any quantitative differences in their ability to attract children or those with no prior churchgoing experience?
Conclusion

Quantitative phase

Quantitative data were used to test a null hypothesis:

There is no significant difference between fresh expressions and growing parish churches in terms of the variation from the norm of attendance percentages for children and those with no churchgoing experience at age eleven or twelve.

Data necessary to calculate child attendance percentages were taken from usual attendance at principle services or, in the case of FE(Network), cell group membership: a sample base of 799. Data necessary to calculate attendance percentages of those with no churchgoing experience at age eleven or twelve were taken from questionnaire responses or, in the case of FE(Network), cell group membership records: a sample base of 535. The internal validity of the test is demonstrated in Chapter 5. Results demonstrated that

- the variation from the norm of attendance by children as a percentage of total attendance was significantly higher in the fresh expressions than the parish churches, taken as a whole sample;
- the significance of this difference increased when comparing those fresh expressions and parish churches with a special focus upon minstry to children and young people;
- both fresh expressions and parish churches demonstrated a significantly higher percentage of attendance by children than the norm for Church of England parishes;
- there was no significant difference between fresh expressions and growing parish churches in terms of the variation from the norm of attendance percentages for those with no churchgoing experience at age eleven or twelve;
- both fresh expressions and parish churches demonstrated a significantly higher percentage of attendance by those with no churchgoing experience at age eleven or twelve than the norm for church attendance in Britain;
Conclusion

Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted with regard to those with no child churchgoing background, but rejected with regard to children. As the sample of congregations was not representative of the Church of England as a whole, no claim is made to generalize these findings beyond the Diocese of Canterbury. However, they constitute a distinctive contribution to the sum of present understanding and may generate questions about the relative effectiveness of fresh expressions and parish churches in attracting children and the unchurched for other dioceses, other demographic contexts, or for the Church of England as a whole.

Qualitative phase

I used qualitative data to investigate the processes underlying both the quantitative differences between the fresh expressions and the parish churches, and the difference between each and national averages. I framed my primary qualitative research question as:

What theory might explain the process of starting and continuing to attend fresh expressions or growing parish churches for parents, children and those with no prior churchgoing background?

Data was generated by semi-structured interviews with 103 participants comprising ministers, other leaders, children, teenagers, parents with varied churchgoing backgrounds and other adults with no child churchgoing background. I analysed data using broad categories provided by existing studies and sub-categories arising from the data itself. Three core categories gradually emerged between which a cyclical relationship allowed me to theorize that they were not just categories but core concepts fundamental to the process of finding a new identity as a member of a Christian faith community. Cross-sectional analysis was supplemented by contextual data analysis and two case studies in order to test a theoretical model developed from the core concepts. The resulting Transformative Cycle offers a unique contribution to an understanding of the process by which new members are socialized into a faith-community and through which they gradually adopt the
distinctive Christian identity associated with it. In Chapter 6, I argue for the validity of the theoretical model from the internal consistency of the research design and method, and for its cross-contextual generalizability from its origin in a range of different kinds of context. In Chapter 7, I also demonstrate the close correlation of its constituent parts with existing congregational studies.

The Transformative Cycle is an explanatory theory that argues that the process by which new members are socialized into the distinctive Christian culture of a church is triggered by changes to their self-perception that raise questions of identity, usually as a result of significant life change. The tension caused by such questions lead to contact with a faith community, usually through the mediation of a known member. This contact exposes them to the Christian tradition transmitted by the congregation through which questions of identity begin to be addressed. Partial resolution leads to adjustments in their self-perception, embedment in the faith community and further engagement with Christian tradition. Gradually, as the cycle continues, the subject is drawn fully into the faith community, internalizes the Christian tradition and resolves questions of self-perception until the transformation is complete. The process operated in both fresh expressions and parish churches and was the same irrespective of past church experience, which made a difference only to the amount of time, and numbers of turns of the circle, taken to effect the transformation of identity.

There are limitations to the explanatory capability of the Transformative Cycle. In both Messy churches, parents who were not team members were not being successfully socialized into the faith community. One participant referred to those who had attended his church for a while but soon lapsed; for them, the cycle was never completed. A few participants had only recently attended and there was no clear evidence of its operation. One couple who had been successfully socialized into their congregation for some years were beginning to feel dissatisfied and had withdrawn somewhat from relationships within it and had begun to question its interpretation of Christian tradition. In its present form, this theoretical model does not explain processes of leaving as well as joining. Finally, the Transformative Cycle can only partially be inferred from the description of children of their experience of belonging to a faith community. However, I found no well-established adult or teenage
member of a faith-community whose story of coming to belong did not describe this general process.

**Mixed methods findings**
A variety of mixed data (interviews, diocesan data, attendance patterns, organizational and publicity documents, websites and observed public worship) clarifies the congregational conditions that facilitate the transformation of identity:

- ministers encourage the active contribution of members and develop the congregational culture;
- a distinct congregational culture of care for others is identified with and internalized by members, and it influences their attitudes and actions;
- the culture of the wider context in which the congregation is situated (locality or network) helps shape the congregational culture;
- there are significant social connections outside the congregation even where those within it are seen as the defining relationships;
- the active agency of members in inviting, welcoming and befriending newcomers is widely practiced;
- the presentation of Christian tradition through worship and ministers’ teaching is experienced as informative, interesting, enjoyable and affective;
- the taking of responsibility for aspects of congregational life and mission is generally considered to be normative;
- the pleasure derived from the choice to participate in congregational life is framed in terms of duty to God and to others, not the consumption of religious commodities.

Taken together, the findings from quantitative and qualitative data allow for some key sociological conclusions.

First, despite not facilitating the socialization of adults into a faith community successfully, the Messy churches were the most successful at attracting a high percentage of children. In the context of my attendance projections, the rapid expansion of the Messy church movement over the last
Conclusion

five years may represent a significant factor in reversing trends of child attendance decline.

Second, there was no significant difference in the capacity of the fresh expressions and parish churches to attract those with no child churchgoing background. Rather, this capacity appears to be closely linked with congregational characteristics and strategies able to be employed as well by parish churches as fresh expressions, which enabled both to socialize higher than average percentages of children and the unchurched into their congregations.

Third, however, many of these characteristics and strategies are integral to the central fresh expressions strategy of inculturation, while others reflect the priority of fresh expressions for collegiate ministry. While my research shows that such practices are not necessarily confined to fresh expressions, continuing general chronic attendance decline suggests that few parish churches have adopted them. The fresh expressions debate may therefore serve to highlight new possibilities for the life and mission of parish congregations.

Fourth, although there was no overall difference in the ability of the fresh expressions and parish churches to attract the unchurched, the fresh expressions were able to adapt to particular social contexts in a way that the broader remit of a parish church would find difficult. The exclusive focus on children, teenagers, networks and the socio-economically deprived by five of the fresh expressions allowed the integration of children and unchurched adults who would have been unlikely to attend a parish church.
Strategic recommendations

The intention is that the outcomes of this research project be used strategically to inform and help shape the work of the new Communities, Ministry and Growth Frameworks within the Diocese of Canterbury. Most of the recommendations that arise from the research outcomes will relate to the Local Church Development Framework, although some will be relevant to the work of other frameworks also.

Any long-term strategy for turning attendance decline into growth must focus on the integration of children and those with no prior experience of church into local or networked faith-communities. However, churches that are successful with these objectives are also associated with growth in attendance by those returning to church. In practice, therefore, the strategic interventions necessary to build long-term growth are also likely to produce short-term growth.

It is also clear that such growth depends upon the development of a strong congregational culture that is able to facilitate the Transformational Cycle. Two conclusions follow from this premise. First, neither central diocesan nor deanery initiatives, officers or programmes can themselves produce growth; spiritual and numerical growth can only be produced by faith-communities. Diocesan and deanery strategies do, however, have the capacity to facilitate or inhibit growth. Strategic development must therefore focus both on removing organizational processes that tend to get in the way of local churches and their ministers making growth a priority, and also on providing the resources they need to help them in this task.

Second, strategic interventions that produce growth cannot be primarily programmatic. Sustained attendance growth depends on the quality of the congregational culture and its capacity to facilitate spiritual growth within those it encounters. The ability to build this capacity is significantly affected by the approach, style, skills and priorities of the minister. Programmes, such as Alpha, Messy Church, schools ministry or innovative services, can be effective, but only insofar as they enable encounter with a faith-community in which the Transformational Cycle is successfully sustained. Therefore, primary strategic interventions must be those that assist ministers to develop a congregational culture that is conducive to spiritual and numeric growth. Secondary,
programmatic, interventions then build on this foundation.

**Licensed Ministries Framework**

Jackson, (2005, 2002) seems ambivalent about whether the leadership qualities necessary to encourage growth effectively are innate personality characteristics to be identified during selection processes or skills to be imparted through initial and continuing ministerial training. He ends up recommending both. This research does not address this issue, much less resolve it; however, the findings do clearly identify some leadership approaches and characteristics common to the very different lead ministers of the participating churches, and which proved to be consistent with the findings of other congregational studies reviewed in Chapter 2:

- All of them were said by their church members to be approachable, friendly, caring and good listeners. Whatever else they did, they gave time to being with people, and they were easy to be with.
- All had a collegiate approach to ministry in which church members were positively encouraged to contribute their skills by taking responsibility for a whole range of aspects of congregational life and ministry.
- All worked hard to develop an existing congregational culture rather than impose an entirely different model of ministry. What they added was unique, but they took their congregations on a gradual and skilled process of change within an existing tradition rather than imposing a different one.

This study therefore recommends that these findings be considered by the Director of Ordinands with regard to selection criteria, senior staff with regard to appointments and the Ministry Development Officer in his planning of the training and development programmes that he oversees.

**Local Church Development Framework**

Each of the participating faith communities were marked by a strong and
distinct congregational culture. While these were all very different from one another, being shaped by unique theological, liturgical, cultural and contextual influences, they shared common characteristics that were related to the capacity to encourage spiritual and numeric growth:

- The congregational culture was internalized by church members either as a clear and coherent description of the nature of the church, or as a story or ‘myth’. Each participant was able to articulate its essence in his or her own words, and not as an empty, theoretical ‘mission statement’.
- Central to each congregational culture was the awareness of the importance of care and concern for others, especially those who are not yet members of the congregation.
- So strongly had this care for others been internalized, that members (including the children) operated from it instinctively even outside of the congregation. When they encountered colleagues, neighbours, friends or family who had undergone significant life change, they invited them to a church service or group. When newcomers arrived at such services or groups, they were made welcome and were quickly incorporated into existing relationship networks.
- Mutually supportive relationships were seen to be at the heart of congregational life, and of prior importance to events or programme.
- Enabling people’s faith-journey was seen to be at the heart of the congregation’s purpose, so that serious, continual engagement with people’s questions and the skilled communication of Christian tradition were high priorities.
- Active discipleship was seen to be both the privilege and duty of each member of the faith-community, so that everyone was encouraged to take on a particular congregational responsibility, which functioned almost as a sacrament of belonging.

This common core of a strong congregational culture was expressed and grounded according to the unique features of each particular social context. Therefore, there were few programmatic interventions common to the participating faith-communities. Nevertheless, some clear conclusions can be
Conclusion

drawn:

- Growing child attendance is associated with a programme in which
  - Children’s questions are related to Christian tradition,
  - There are activities in which there is lots of fun and food,
  - Friendships develop beyond the programme,
  - A personal spirituality is nurtured.
- Messy Church seems particularly effective in this regard.
- Church organizations with a wider community function, such as church schools, parent & toddler groups or social networking groups, can have a secondary effect of drawing new people into the church if they are able to express a strong congregational culture of care for others.
- Small groups are vital. They allow the creative connection between Christian tradition and personal circumstances to occur within the safety of mutually supportive friendships. Some congregations might be small enough to function in this way; otherwise Alpha-type enquirers’ groups or confirmation groups have a key role at the beginning of a faith-journey, while some form of home, study or cell group helps the Transformative Cycle to keep turning.

Therefore, this study recommends that:

- Any pastoral reorganization scheme that leaves a congregation without a designated focal minister (e.g., some forms of the Minster model or some team ministries) should be avoided. A strong congregational culture, and the programme through which it is expressed, needs to be developed and nurtured through a consistent leader in a specific congregational context.
- A comprehensive database of parish trends be developed and maintained in order to inform decisions about pastoral reorganization and measure the outcomes of mission and growth interventions.
- Growing churches be identified and invited to assist with parish consultancies.
Conclusion

- Mission resources be prioritized to assist growing and static churches rather than to rescue failing ones.
- The LCD team offers an initial parish consultancy service to aid the development of a strong congregational culture, shaped by context but able to incorporate the common characteristics shown to effectively facilitate mission. This could be custom-designed, but an effective start could be made by using Robert Warren’s *The Healthy Churches’ Handbook: A Process for Revitalizing Your Church* (2004).
- The dimension of parish consultancy that advises about programmatic change should emerge from the development of congregational culture but should consider the common evidence about bridging organizations and small groups.
- The Mission Growth Advisor continue his already excellent programme of promoting Messy Church both as fresh expressions and as a dimension of parish mission.
- Fresh expressions of church continue to be developed and supported to meet the particular challenge represented by hard to reach sections of parishes, or social groups that are under-represented in parish churches.
- The LCD Core Team notes that deanery projects can only be effective insofar as they help implement change in discrete congregations and, therefore, that the primary focus for mission and growth intervention be parish development.

*Children, Schools and Young People’s Framework*

To the extent that the Children, Schools and Young People’s Framework is focused on facilitating faith encounters and discipleship for young people within parishes, the observations and recommendations about children in the previous section will be relevant to its work. In addition, however, this research has demonstrated:

- Strong statistical evidence that even occasional attendance at church services is a significant predictor of church attendance in later adult life.
**Conclusion**

- The strong probability that this trend is associated with and strengthened by an experience of Christian belonging rather than mere exposure to Christian worship and teaching.
- That children are not only capable of discerning and exploring the personal and spiritual significance of Christian belonging, worship and teaching, but in some circumstances do so more quickly and profoundly than the accompanying adults.
- The clear association between involvement by parish churches or fresh expressions in primary schools (e.g. assemblies, teaching, services or after-school clubs) and rising child attendance at church services, especially where the local school is a CE primary school.
- The productive effect of a policy of church attendance as a qualification for admission to CE primary or secondary schools where the congregational culture of the parish church effectively sustains the Transformative Cycle. In two parishes in this study, many families began attending services in order for their children to qualify for church schools, but ended by belonging to a faith-community even after admission was achieved.

This study therefore recommends that the Children, Schools and Young People’s Framework develop a consultancy service for parishes and fresh expressions to help them maximize their links with local primary and secondary schools.

**Communities and Partnership Framework**

Although the focus of this study has been on attendance growth rather than strengthening the social capital between churches and communities, some clear evidence has emerged about the connection between the two:

- Many of the other studies reviewed here have demonstrated a clear correlation between churchgoing and altruistic involvement in the wider community. Many of our church members are highly likely also to be involved in a voluntary capacity in other community contexts.
Conclusion

- However, the evidence suggests that such involvement will build the social capital of these individuals, rather than the church, unless it is clear that they acting on behalf of the church community.
- Growing churches tend to have permeable boundaries. Their members demonstrate a good balance between relationship networks within the faith-community and relationship networks outside it; in growing churches, the congregational culture encourages a conscious connection between the two.
- It is likely, therefore, that a virtuous circle can be encouraged which increases both attendance and community partnerships, at least locally.

Therefore, this study recommends that the Communities and Partnership Framework develop a consultancy service in order to advise parishes and fresh expressions about how to use the existing links between individual church members and the wider community to develop effective partnership projects between the whole faith-community and the context in which it is situated.

Resource Management and Compliance Framework

This research has demonstrated how attendance trends over time derived from quantitative data can help to identify patterns of growth, decline or stasis in parishes, dioceses or national churches. Even the consideration of the distinction between child and adult attendance can begin to suggest a more nuanced portrait of a church's life; the addition of other data trends would give that picture texture and depth, and significantly aid decisions about pastoral organization or resourcing. It is not that synchronic data does not have importance; the size of particular congregation or its ability to pay the parish share at a certain point in time may be an indication of its health at that point. But diachronic data adds the significance of trends: a small but growing church may need a very different resourcing response from one that is in chronic decline, for example, while the necessary interventions to help halt attendance decline in a large church may go unnoticed if the relative size of the congregation is all that is considered. Such trends are also integral to produc-
Conclusion

ing accurate performance indicators and a vital method for assessing the effectiveness of structural, financial, pastoral or missional interventions.

However, data must be effectively gathered before it can be effectively used. In my study, I found that, of 290 parish churches or benefices from which attendance returns should have been made, only 39 per cent had complete attendance data for all six years. I also found repeated instances of data-input error; for example, where there were several sets of data for the same parish or where the adult and child attendance had been transposed. The Church of England Research and Statistics Department reports that the rate of response from parishes in the Diocese of Canterbury varied between 70 per cent in 2009 and 96 per cent in 2010 and suggests that this variation is likely to have been a significant factor in the apparent rise in diocesan attendance between these two years (Odunsi 2012). In a recent diocesan analysis of trends between 2006 and 2010, data for all five years were available from only 41 per cent of parishes. The accurate use of data is dependent upon a high and consistent rate of response from parish officers.

This study therefore recommends:

- The creation and maintenance of comprehensive database of parish statistics that is capable of cross-referencing different kinds of data, producing trends and making projections.
- A more rigorous system for ensuring the compliance of parishes in making their statistical returns, using sanctions if necessary.
- A review of the data-input procedure to investigate ways to ensure greater accuracy.
- That the resulting trends are required to become integral to resourcing decision-making processes.
- In particular, that newly growing churches are accorded the financial support to build on and embed their success, recognising that the Transformative Cycle takes time to change new churchgoers into financially supportive disciples.
Conclusion

Achieving sustainable growth

It can be done. Both quantitative and qualitative studies have demonstrated significant exceptions to general trends of church attendance decline in Britain, and my study represents a contribution to this body of evidence.

Nevertheless, if the present chronic and potentially terminal decline of the Church in Britain is to be reversed, mission strategies must change radically. The traditional mission strategy of the Churches in Britain has relied on adults returning to a childhood experience of church, but the numbers of those with such a background is fast declining with the collapse of Sunday attendance by children. Unless churches become better able to attract children, or those with no childhood experience of church attendance, decline will continue with decreasing hope of reversing the trend.

There is no doubt that the fresh expressions movement can help. Some fresh expressions, particularly Messy churches, offer the hope of increasing the numbers of children being socialized into Christian faith communities that, together with rising midweek attendance in parish churches, has the capacity to compensate for falling Sunday attendance by children.

However, there is no indication that fresh expressions are any more effective than growing parish churches at helping to socialize those with no child churchgoing background into faith communities. The capacity to facilitate this process through the Transformative Cycle is associated, rather, with congregational culture and strategy. Nevertheless, the development of such a culture and strategy is closely connected with some central arguments of fresh expressions theory. Fresh expressions praxis can be argued to be effective, therefore, but not unique to fresh expressions, although some fresh expressions do demonstrate a contextual flexibility denied to parish churches.

Furthermore, the very existence of the Fresh Expressions movement, its theory, its praxis and the ensuing debate has led to a wide exposure of dioceses, churches, priests and parishioners within the Church of England to questions of contextual mission. By doing so, it has helped to reinvigorate the whole Church and has the capacity to continue to do so.

A reinvigorated Church is the answer. Dioceses and parishes that will take the evidence seriously and be willing to shape their structures, priorities, resources and practices in order to develop faith-communities with such a
Conclusion

strong congregational culture that they cannot fail to promote both spiritual and numeric growth.
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