Durham E-Theses

Faith, dialogue and difference in English Christian community work: learning "good practice"?

Orton, Andrew

How to cite:

Orton, Andrew (2008) *Faith, dialogue and difference in English Christian community work: learning "good practice"?*, Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/2921/

Use policy

Faith, Dialogue and Difference

in English Christian

Community Work:

Learning "Good Practice"?

PhD Thesis – Volume 1

Andrew Orton

School of Applied Social Sciences

Durham University

0 7 OCT 2008

2008

Contents

VOLUME 2

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Declarations

None of the material contained within this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree in this or any other university, and includes no contributions from any other researchers except where indicated by appropriate referencing.

Abstract

Faith, Dialogue and Difference in English Christian Community Work:

Learning "Good Practice"?

Andrew Orton

This thesis examines the impact of difference within English Christian community work practice, setting this work in the context of broader debates over the relationship between faith, politics, identity and practice. Several dimensions of difference are considered, including difference as diversity of practice, difference as contestation of practice, and difference as 'the other'. A multi-stage research design is employed to study these dimensions of difference further, based on analysing usage of the concept of 'good practice'. This concept is found to be continually defined, re-defined, applied into particular situations and contested through everyday interpretations, interactions and processes. The complexity of interests, relationships and structures at different levels are explored through consecutive case studies, highlighting both individual and organisational dynamics. An analysis of the data highlights several areas where current understandings and

applications are creating counter-productive tendencies and dilemmas for all those involved. Questions of identity, purpose and learning are all found to be central to understanding and addressing these difficulties. Finally, a refined model of Christian community work is proposed that is based on informal education. This model begins to resolve these difficulties, thus helping to develop an improved understanding of this work to inform policy and practice.

Acknowledgements

on faith communities and young people, along with fellow PhD students and staff at Durham University, for many useful conversations and mutual support along the way.

Thanks are also due to my examiners, Fred Robinson and Richard Farnell, for agreeing to examine this thesis.

On a personal note, I couldn't have completed the thesis without the support and encouragement of friends and family, and particularly my wife, Sharon, who has provided continual encouragement throughout.

Most of all, grateful thanks are due to all of the people who willingly participated in this study, and in the process submitted themselves to critical questioning of their life and work. As I hope this study will faithfully show, it is in the hands of people such as these, who are willing to question, be questioned and learn together from the experience, that the real potential to develop 'good practice' lies.

It's been a long journey of faith to get here, yet God continues to surprise me with His love and grace, so ultimate thanks are due to God, who can do immeasurably more than we can ask or even imagine. It is my hope that this research will contribute in some small way to encouraging people to ask difficult questions about the work of those claiming to act in God's name, so that we might be more able to discern God's truth, love and Spirit where they are at work to redeem our personal and corporate, social, church and political lives.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The iconic images of the terrorist attacks in the USA on 11th September 2001 by people claiming religious motivation, and the subsequent attacks in Britain, have marked a period where faith itself has been thrust firmly back into the public spotlight. Perhaps never have the rationales and actions (whether individual or collective) of those claiming to be motivated by religious faith come under so much public scrutiny. But these high profile and politicised events have been only the tip of the iceberg in terms of a range of potent forces reshaping the social role of religion in recent years.

As many local areas become increasingly diverse and multicultural as a result of increased global mobility and migration, communities, professionals and social policy makers face challenges in encouraging people from different backgrounds and belief systems to live and work together cohesively. Worldviews, such as religious beliefs, which might previously have been expected to provide the common worldview to bind a nation together, are now frequently argued to be part of what divides citizens from each other. Furthermore, *any* state-related role for religion is opposed by many secular and religious people for fear of reprising past abuses arising from this relationship. Democratic states especially have wrestled with the dilemmas of balancing a mandate from the majority with protecting the rights of minorities to be free from

discrimination and oppression. Religion has played a particularly significant role in such dilemmas, because it is frequently entangled with issues of culture and identity for individuals and collectivities. As a result, whilst religion can provide a particularly strong base for binding a group together internally, it is also frequently implicated as a major factor in dividing different groups from each other within a diverse society.

These changes have taken place in a context where many earlier predictions held that religion would become increasingly insignificant in the vanguard of progress. Built on such assumptions, and concerns about the issues highlighted above, the past policies of many Western countries tended to restrict the public place and role of religion, despite vestigial influence in some spheres. However, wider changes in economies and socio-political methods for social welfare and governance, in addition to concerns being articulated about the exclusion of some groups from these processes, have left some Western states keen to build new relationships with faith groups.

Despite these changes, many faith groups have continued their long-standing involvement in various forms of social welfare work with the communities around them, irrespective of government concern, based on their own outworking of their faith as they understand it. However, the changing policy context has opened up new possibilities for combining with others in this work, prompting diverse responses from those

involved. At the same time, attempts by Governments and other bodies to regulate and define this social welfare work have increased, not least through increasingly-stringent regulations, training requirements and imposed standards for 'quality improvement'. However, the particular approach being recommended or enforced by government is not always entirely accepted by faith groups, whose historical involvement in this field often pre-dates government intervention by a long way. In addition, the traditions, cultures and theologies of such groups are often considered counter-cultural to present understandings and secularised worldviews, creating the potential for significant clashes over both the purpose and methods underpinning their activities in wider society.

Within such an environment, the actions of individuals and groups claiming to be motivated by faith take on a salience which extends far beyond themselves. The rationales and actions of such people raise broader questions about the political and professional hegemony shaping social welfare policy, by bringing to the table alternatively-grounded bases, means and even purposes for interventions. Yet the practice of these individuals and groups, especially as they interact with others, increasingly faces questions about how it might relate to broader existing theory on matters such as professional ethics and organisational change.

This thesis explores one small aspect of this complex web of developments by investigating the concept of 'good practice' as it is

currently being debated, used and applied in English Christian community work. The central research focus is a critical analysis of the question "What is considered 'good practice' in Christian community work in England?", with a particular emphasis on exploring this question in relation to difference (as explained in Section 1.2 below). Chapter 4 sets out the rationale for choosing to focus specifically on Christian community work in more detail. However, to provide an outline of the nature of this study in this initial chapter, it is necessary to provide an indication of the approach taken to defining Christian community work. It is also important to highlight why studying 'good practice' and difference in relation to this work is important, and how these aspects of the topic might relate together.

1.1 What is Christian Community Work? And Why Study It?

Determining which activities might be classed as Christian community work is an issue for substantial debate, as this thesis will explore. My initial broad working definition for the term 'Christian community work' which formed the focus of the research was:

> "the involvement of individual Christians and church congregations in activities which address the concerns of the wider community, and which are not just for the benefit of the existing congregation membership."

This definition covers a broad range of possible activities, including the provision of space for community groups to meet and activities to take place; support offered to vulnerable groups such as elderly or homeless people; organising work on issues of wider community concern (such as cleaning up the local environment); creating social or learning opportunities (such as family fun days or classes); and involvement in work campaigning for action or change relating to independent or statutory organisations in the area, connecting with broader groups on issues of common concern. More controversially, the term 'community work' in this context might also extend to include youth work or evangelistic activity. In keeping with the intention to start with a broad definition, this working definition left the precise boundaries of the term open for analysis based on the findings. The nature of the rationales behind such decisions to include or exclude particular activities within different definitions of community work, and the different understandings concerning the relationship between those activities included and excluded, formed an important part of the study.

Starting from this definition also makes it clear from the outset that, by its very nature, Christian community work operates at the intersection of individuals or groups connected in some way to the Christian faith with the wider public, and often the state, not just with those who are pre-existing members. This engagement in public and policy concerns is of itself controversial in the current context, and illustrates why this work

is a particularly important microcosm of the broader issues with which the thesis began. (These issues are explored in much greater depth in the literature review provided in Chapters 2 and 3).

However, this definition was informed and tempered by debates over the nature of community work, and what characteristics might cause this work to be labelled 'Christian', as the following sub-sections consider in turn. In particular, as the research began to uncover much more activity operating within organisations that were not churches but which were still labelled 'Christian', these were also included within the scope of the study.

What is Community Work?

Even without any faith-related adjective or label, the term 'community work' can be used as a relatively broad descriptive term for activities undertaken by groups of people with some common social welfare goal. It can also be used in a more specialist sense to refer to the activities undertaken by members of a quasi-professionalised occupational group ('community workers') who might be argued to have special knowledge, values and skills which they employ to facilitate people in communities of interest or locality improving their lives (see, for example, Banks 2004:17-46). In between these broader and narrower definitions of the term, there are variations which indicate some of the historical connections and tensions which have emerged as forms of community

work have developed over the last few centuries (Popple, 1995; Banks, 2004).

For this thesis, I decided to start by using the term 'community work' in its broadest, least technical sense, in order to avoid predetermining findings at the outset of the research by selecting the literature and organisations to study from within too narrow a framework. Indeed, the reason for choosing 'community work' as the central focus for the study, rather than alternative terms considered in the initial research brief such as 'regeneration work' or 'social action', was that the term 'community work' appeared to be in the most widespread use by those with whom the research was to be conducted. Hence, part of the purpose of the research undertaken for the thesis was to uncover the variety of activities that might be regarded as 'community work' by the participants in the empirical research. This approach shares much in common with Friedson's (1983:27) phenomenological approach to studying related terms (such as 'profession') as 'folk concepts' by exploring how people use the term in common usage, how they construct the meaning of the term by their activities and categories, and the consequences for the way they see themselves and their work. As might be expected, the term 'community work' was used in many different ways in both the literature and by the research participants, as later chapters analyse in more detail. However, the focus of the thesis is not just on the practice termed 'community work' in isolation, but on the

specific practice termed 'Christian community work'. Hence, the definitional approach used to take into account this faith-specific adjective will now be considered.

What is 'Christian Community Work'?

The use of the term 'Christian' to refer to a particular type of community work covers an equally broad range of possibilities to those presented by the wider term. I have adopted a similar methodological approach to dealing with this broad range of possibilities for defining 'Christian community work' as already described for 'community work' more generally above. This involved taking as the starting point and subject of critical study *all* work which claimed in some way to be 'Christian'.

But who is doing this work, and on what basis might it be considered 'Christian'? Several possibilities immediately present themselves (and more were uncovered in the subsequent research). Community work might be considered 'Christian' if it is undertaken by one or more of the following:

(i)   church congregations;

(ii)   other organisations established with purposes that mention the Christian faith;

(iii)   individuals who see their own Christian faith as an important

influence on their work (wherever or whichever organisation

they might work for or with).

Throughout the study, where I have wished to be specific, I have used the term 'church-related' to refer to organisations or individual practice claiming some connection with a church congregation or organised denomination. By contrast, I have used the term 'faith-related' to refer to organisations or individual practice claiming some connection with a lived belief. In both cases, the nature, consistency and strength of this claimed connection has remained open to critical analysis.

A fourth option would have been to consider particular community work as 'Christian' if some other person or authority considered it to be in keeping with their understanding of this religion and its central characteristics/values. However, the choice of whose perspective was authoritative in designating activity 'Christian' would be likely to be partial, fairly arbitrary and contestable, so this was excluded. Instead, the study focused on critically analysing those who claimed (at either an individual and/or an organisational level) to be motivated or influenced by the Christian faith. I have tended to use the term 'religion' to refer to the former sense (i.e. when referring to institutional religion as set out doctrinally and organisationally by a particular collective source), and the term 'faith' to refer to the latter more personally-meaningful

(owned worldview) sense, albeit recognising that this faith has both individual and collective aspects.

In fact, the debate over what particular characteristics might make this work 'Christian' proved to be an important theme in the resulting data, and is analysed in detail in later chapters. Building on the phenomenological approach to contested 'folk' concepts outlined above, I was mindful that a strict essentialist approach involving the seeking out of pre-determined common factors or a comparison with a pre-existing ideal type might obscure some important aspects of the issues being studied. Hence, one of the primary fields which the research was designed to openly explore was the nature of the connection between faith and practice. This necessitated avoiding overly-prescriptive initial definitions, focusing instead on these concepts as they were in use by practitioners and other respondents, not least in their everyday interactions.

By grounding these understandings in the broad definitional strategy outlined, the work can be set in a comparative international context, as this approach allows connections to be made with a broad range of relevant literature (e.g. the literature on religion and development) where the terms in use might be different. In the process, the focus of the study remains clearly on Christian community work as those activities whereby work is undertaken with some connection to the public sphere, and with some ascribed connection to the Christian faith.

1.2 Why Study Difference in Relation to 'Good Practice'?

As these definitional issues begin to illustrate, a research approach to studying difference in practice, which starts with and takes seriously respondents' own perspectives, very quickly encounters difference in a number of forms, not least in trying to understand the following:

(i) **Difference as diversity of practice** – understanding the range of practice, including how it might be grouped or categorised, and how the relationships between different practices might be understood by practitioners and/or theorists.

(ii) **Difference as contestation of practice** – understanding when different practices or rationales clash, and how such clashes might be handled or resolved, especially when they are seen as competing or incompatible.

(iii) **Difference as 'the other'** – understanding the personal and corporate relational dimensions when encountering those who do things differently or who are perceived as different.

Handling difference is important for community work practitioners who have to make decisions on a day-to-day basis between possible alternatives (*difference as diversity of practice*). They often then have to justify their decisions to others, who may advocate different

approaches and have different forms of relationship with or authority and influence over their work (*difference as contestation of practice*). In addition, this work invariably involves practitioners forming relationships with others, and becoming involved in creating/maintaining situations where these others form, develop or change their own relationships with each other.   In these situations, the community worker has to handle the social, relational and political dynamics resulting from *difference as 'the other'*.   These dynamics entail dealing with complex issues of identities and values, as Weeks (1990:88-89) describes well:

> "Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others.   At its most basic, it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality.   But it is also about your social relationships, your complex involvement with others, and in the modern world these have become ever more complex and confusing.   Each of us live[s] with a variety of potentially contradictory identities, which battle within us for allegiance. ... At the centre, however, are the values we share or wish to share with others. ... Identities are not neutral.   Behind the quest for identity are different and often conflicting values.   By saying who we are, we are also striving to express what we are, what we believe and what we desire.   The problem is that these beliefs, needs and desires are often patently

in conflict, not only between different communities but within individuals themselves."

Whilst there are many other theoretical approaches to understanding difference, this thesis concentrates on these three senses and connotations of the term, and most importantly how they relate together. It is this relationship, both within and between these different understandings of difference, which forms the 'dialogue' element of the research. In practice, however, I found that this relationship was not necessarily of a dialogical nature, but often suppressed and implicit. The lack of a clearly-understood relationship between these different senses and connotations of the term 'difference' was found to contribute to significant problems in understanding practice in this context, which this thesis aims to address.

Some social policy theorists in the context of studying social division on grounds of 'race', class, gender, etc. (e.g. Lewis, 2003:92) make a technical distinction between diversity as the "social plurality of identifications and ways of living conceived outside dynamics of power and inequality" and difference as social plurality which incorporates these dimensions. However, in this thesis, the terms 'diversity' and 'difference' are used interchangeably, without such a technical distinction, to avoid further complicating the multiple connotations embedded in the three forms of difference described above. Instead,

issues of power and inequality are addressed by considering the way that identities and values can relate, as Weeks (1990:89) describes:

> "All this makes debates over values particularly fraught and delicate: they are not simply speculations about the world and our place in it; they touch on fundamental, and deeply felt, issues about who we are and what we want to become. They also pose major political questions: how to achieve a reconciliation between our collective needs as human beings and our specific needs as individuals and members of diverse communities, how to balance the universal and the particular."

This is particularly pertinent in studying 'community work', as any work labelled 'community' requires some conceptual or theoretical base to describe what this term means. Critical analyses of the usage of 'community' show multiple definitions (Popple, 1995:2-4; Banks, 2003a), with these definitions sharing in common the positive, warmly persuasive way that the term is used to describe existing or alternative sets of social relationships (Williams, 1976). However, as Plant's (1974) analysis shows, this concept is an 'essentially contested' one, being used in diverse ways which all include an inevitable moral/evaluative dimension depending on the value base and political/ideological outlook of the user. To capture this crucial deeper moral/political/ideological dimension in a way which includes both religious and other orienting social/political frameworks, this study uses the term 'worldview'. The

impact of such worldviews on the development of community work in different settings is a significant theme of this thesis, with the historical impact in the English context being further examined in Chapter 3. However, before exploring these broader worldviews, it is important in the interests of transparency and reflexivity to briefly outline the historical experiences which have contributed to my own worldview as a researcher, and how these have informed this choice of research topic.

1.3 My Interest – What Led to the Study?

From a personal perspective, my own experience as a community work practitioner had raised a number of important questions which I felt were not adequately addressed in existing literature or the professional training I had received. A brief explanation of the background which led me to undertake this research may help to set some of the questions underlying this thesis into a personal context, whilst also providing some transparency regarding my background as a form of reflexivity to inform the later methodological discussion.

As a community work practitioner who is also a Christian, I have worked in a range of organisational settings, each of which had its own different perspective on the question of how faith might relate to practice. I had first been drawn into community work as a vocation through the experience of working on a 'year-out' scheme between 1995 and 1996

with a small Anglican church in Top Valley, an outer-city estate in Nottingham. Here, with virtually no training, I had been involved in supporting the running of various church and community-orientated activities throughout the week, working alongside volunteers from the church. It was here too that I first began to get acquainted with the complex process of writing grant applications and managing building developments, as the church successfully sought to increase its multi-use space for a combination of church and community use. Whilst this work had included engagement with people living nearby, and work within local schools, this work had very little connection or communication with other statutory and voluntary agencies' activities. Despite trying to make links with these other agencies, this work operated very much in isolation from them and their wider strategic agendas. Being a Christian was essential to my role within this context, as an integral part of the church community and its development, but training was considered largely unnecessary compared to learning on the job through relationships. The role itself was informally described and extremely flexible, tending to shape itself around the different characters of each subsequent person to work within this 'year out' placement, whilst requiring the management of a very broad range of different expectations in practice.

The interest generated here had combined with the invaluable support and grounding in the Christian faith which I had received during my

teenage years as a result of youth work by a Wesleyan Methodist Church in my home town of Nuneaton, including several short summer experiences doing youth, community and children's work in different settings. Together, these led me to seek professional training in Community and Youth Work at the University College of St. Martin, Lancaster (now University of Cumbria). A principal reason for deciding to undertake professional training was the desire to learn a more widely-informed and 'professional' way of doing things, so that I could do them 'better'. A major factor in the choice of this particular course was the option to integrate study in Christian faith-based practice as part of the course, whilst at the same time gaining a professional qualification which was recognised more widely than just in church-related circles. In the event, the course generated many heated (albeit often constructive) exchanges between tutors, Christian students and other students when different understandings of the place of faith, and its appropriate impact on community and youth work, were addressed. The programme also included two placements, with both of mine being undertaken in secular agencies – one in a local authority youth service, and one in a voluntary sector advice agency. In these placement settings, holding a faith was largely seen as a personal thing which, whilst you were free to hold it, shouldn't be allowed to interfere with your work. Being a 'professional' in these settings meant keeping your faith (together with other personal aspects of your life) hidden and undiscussed. The main areas where

these agencies recognised a potential impact for faith were in causing problems. For example, one perceived problem was that workers who ascribed to a faith were seen as being likely to be too judgemental about those holding incompatible moral positions. Another perceived problem was that faith would create an ulterior motive for engaging in practice, resulting in unacceptable proselytising behaviour which would be incompatible with the agencies' public persona. In both agencies, I went on to undertake additional work, as a paid sessional youth work in one and as a volunteer and trustee in the second.

These experiences contrasted with some additional part-time youth work which I undertook for the Young Men's Christian Association. In this voluntary organisation, there was scope for directly including aspects of the Christian faith in activities – for example, in reflecting on Christian themes within the music and drama work undertaken. However, the particular influence of the Christian faith was frequently ambiguous and left to individual members of staff to work out in their own practice (or not, if they were not themselves Christian).

On leaving university, after a short interlude working for a further education college on widening access to their courses, I was employed by a charitable company which had developed out of partnership working between a local Methodist church and the Probation Service. As this project had developed before my arrival, it had become entirely secular in terms of its objects, management and operation. This included losing

any connection with Christianity or the local churches other than continuing to occupy a former Sunday School building and the ex-caretaker's house next door. Hence, I found myself, as a Christian and as a professional worker, in the position of managing a project which had developed out of church partnership working in the local community but which was now otherwise entirely secular. In addition, as a relatively large voluntary organisation in the area, the project was involved in working with a range of smaller organisations, some of which more directly claimed Christian identities, as well as with statutory organisations and strategic regeneration and health initiatives. As a manager, I was also involved in supervising staff with a range of different personal beliefs and identities, and I endeavoured to find ways to set an example of integrity both organisationally and personally as my practice developed in this context.

Ultimately, ongoing reflection on this range of experience led me to ask fundamental questions about the nature of professionalism, the importance of training, and the impact of faith on practice. In particular, my experience of being a practitioner who was also a Christian has often been one of not fitting the stereotypical roles – being publicly recognised as a Christian in organisations where this is not expected or seen as problematic, whilst sometimes generating uncomfortable questions by reflecting critically whilst practising in Christian-related settings. This experience has occurred in settings

where the employing agency's perspective on the religious identity of the practitioner have ranged from hostile through immaterial to an essential component if they are to practise effectively. This experience has also included settings where the attitude towards the need for training has ranged from ambivalent or sceptical to essential, often connected with different views of what professionalism entails and whether it is necessarily helpful in this work.

The decision to undertake this PhD was an attempt to explore some of the issues raised by this experience in a structured way through research, with the aim of critically analysing these issues through reflecting on evidence gained from a wider context. The next section outlines the structure within which this research will be described and the findings presented.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis Approach

In Chapter 2, I begin by briefly setting the historic international context, particularly highlighting three social shifts (globalisation, consumerism and postmodernism). I argue that these are central to the changing context for the research because of their effects on changing social relationships and interactions between different worldviews. Internationally, religion is shown to be reasserting itself as an influential social force despite earlier predictions of secularisation, constructing

complex relationships with the state and other actors within civil society that vary considerably in different local contexts. Identity is central to these relationships, as actors of various persuasions seek to position themselves and construct their relationships with others in ways which are consistent with their worldview. This is especially apparent in forms of faith-related social action, whether in terms of international diplomacy and state-craft, or localised community service.

Chapter 3 then analyses the particular national context in England, drawing primarily on a range of literature, including 'grey' literature produced by various organisations and public bodies. Significant differences are identified between the trends and agendas influencing the different parties involved in faith-related community work in this context.

In Chapter 4, I then set out the methodological approach taken to investigate Christian faith-based community work in England as one particular instance of this controversial social impact of religion. This chapter includes my rationale for the multi-stage case study approach adopted, together with the way that key methodological issues such as reflexivity have been handled.

Chapter 5 analyses the resulting research evidence to show how the differences in agenda and perspective outlined in Chapter 3 can often lead to divergent and/or destructive tendencies in the resultant

community work projects. In spite of these difficulties, Christian community work projects are shown to be important, not least because of their arguably distinctive contribution to civil society, including their potential to develop bridges, relationships and 'creative spaces' between the different parties involved. By using the research data to analyse the related concept that these projects have a 'distinctive ethos', I show how theology and identity are both crucial factors in understanding this work. Without understanding these dynamics, particular problems can be created in securing sustainable ownership and resourcing for this work, as well as in developing a clear rationale for it.

To understand these dynamics further, in Chapter 6, I analyse the different ways that discourses of 'good practice' have been applied to this work. This discourse is found to be used in different ways in response to evidence of practice diversity in order to develop a normative base from which practice might be evaluated. Based on the data from the research, I outline how current uses of the term 'good practice' can be summarised in three categories: (i) "Whatever is appropriate" to particular local circumstances, based on local discretion; (ii) Finding "common ground" through terminology that transcends difference; (iii) Standardisation masquerading as professionalisation. However, examples from the research demonstrate how each of these identified usages can be problematic in practice. Significantly, these

usages frequently fail to encourage continued reflective learning at both individual and corporate levels, which limits their ability to support sustained interaction between those from different backgrounds. In Chapter 7, data from the final stage is then considered to explore practitioner perspectives on the challenges to incorporating faith within learning, including within an undergraduate professional education programme and broader focus groups. Chapter 8 considers a final case study that illustrates the benefits and challenges arising from attempts to incorporate a different approach based on reflective learning on identity, culture, theology and tradition.

The thesis concludes by considering the contribution that this research may make to understanding the purpose and process of Christian community work, and hence how it might form a starting point for developing a more adequate notion of what 'good practice' might be in this context.

Chapter 2: The relationship between religion, social action and the state – an overview of the international literature

2.1 Introduction – The Importance of an International Perspective

Whilst the focus of this thesis is on Christian community work in England, the issues at stake (as outlined in Chapter 1) have much wider potential implications. Different understandings of religion and other worldviews, and their potential impact on actions in the social world, have a long and contested history. These different understandings have arisen across diverse contexts, which have in turn shaped prevalent expectations concerning the relationship between religion, social action and the state.

This chapter briefly sets the contemporary English context in a broader global and historical framework. In doing this, the chapter outlines some of the key issues which have influenced the development of forms of social action (such as community work) in ways connected to religion at different times and places, as well as highlighting some of the different ways in which these have been understood. In the process, the chapter highlights key themes and debates (such as the relationship

between religion and politics) which have emerged from previous research in different international settings. These themes and debates centre on the instability of the secularisation thesis in the current climate, and the way in which the relationship between religion and social/political action is being reconfigured in a changing world. These themes are then used in subsequent chapters to provide a critical perspective on issues arising in the English context by sensitising the research to areas where the particularity of the national context might be influential.

Because the issues raised here are so far-reaching in their implications, it has only been possible to provide an overview of many highly complex yet crucial debates. As such, the primary intention in raising these issues is to highlight areas of substantial debate as they are relevant to this research, rather than provide a definitive treatment of any one particular area. Within these summary discussions, references are provided to indicative wider works which tackle these topics in much more depth.

2.2 Setting the Scene – Historical Perspectives on Religion and Secularisation

The social importance of religion has long been recognised, and formed an important focus for researchers in the early stages of social and human sciences. Much contemporary thought on religion remains influenced by historically-prominent anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists such as Malinowsky, Freud, Durkheim and Weber (Geertz, 1999). Historical perspectives from across these disciplines have highlighted the importance of religion in providing sources of meaning and belonging for individuals and groups, whilst also shaping their interactions with others (McGuire, 1992; Geertz, 1999). Whether as Marx's "opium of the people" or as Durkheim's totemic symbol of the group itself, standing for the values central to the community (to cite just a few examples), the importance of religion in social stability has long been recognised (Giddens, 1993:465). Furbey and Macey (2005:107) summarise two of the main schools of thought regarding this importance in the following way:

> "Within a functionalist perspective, religion is a kind of 'social glue' that binds individuals and groups into the social order (Durkheim, 1915; Parsons, 1965); within a phenomenological framework, it provides a symbolic universe, or sacred canopy,

that gives meaning to a world of otherwise potential chaos (Berger, 1967)"

However, these traditional perspectives have experienced profound difficulties in responding to two major elements of contemporary life, namely social change and the increased diversity and interaction of cultures. In the context of the latter, traditional approaches have experienced difficulties in encompassing the range of beliefs, practices and aspects of social life which might be considered 'religious' in diverse cultures and contexts. For academic researchers, this has created substantial longstanding difficulties in defining religion as a category, concept and/or practice (Giddens, 1993:457-459). Traditionally, sociological definitions have either adopted a substantive approach (defining 'what religion is') or a functional approach (defining 'what religion does' for the individual and social group). However, both definitions encounter substantial problems in handling cultural and religious diversity, as well as in dealing adequately with social change (McGuire, 1992:11-15). This is because both approaches depend on a static set of characteristics or roles as the core of their definition. This means that they struggle to adapt to ways in which these roles or characteristics might change in diverse times, contexts, cultures and places. These problems are compounded by sociological tendencies to begin definitional strategies by treating 'religion' as a generic category across such diversity, and by predetermining membership within this

category before critically analysing particular situations. The methodological implications of these conceptual difficulties, and the way that these have been handled in this research, are explored further in Chapter 4. However, because much of the available literature focuses on 'religion' as a generic category in this way, this chapter temporarily uses the term in a broad way to facilitate critical analysis of the range of existing literature.

This literature is increasingly concerned with the potential role of religions in relation to social and cultural interaction, especially in terms of activities which contribute to or hinder positive contributions to social welfare. Farnell et al's (2003:44) study of the contribution of "faith communities" to urban regeneration in Britain argues that:

> "The positive examples of religion as a force for social justice and community service ... must be balanced by a recognition of religion as a source of conflict, division and oppression"

In addition, this dual-edged contribution made by religions is not static, but acts as a significant force for both social control and social change (McGuire, 1992). As Furbey and Macey (2005:99) note:

> "Like potent secular ideologies, [religion] can unite or divide, include or exclude; it can provide the impetus to struggle for social justice or it can legitimise cruelty and oppression; it can promote social cohesion or conflict."

This capacity stems from the ways that religions (depending on the content and manifestation of their belief) can be used to control people, whilst also having significant potential to be:

> "a profoundly revolutionary force, holding out a vision of how things might or ought to be. Historically, religion has been one of the most important motivations for [social] change, because of its particular effectiveness in uniting people's beliefs with their actions, their ideas with their social lives." (McGuire, 1992:221)

Despite substantial historical evidence of this potential, much of the theoretical discourse over the past century has argued that the world must inevitably undergo a process of secularization (Wilson, 1966; Wilson, 1982; Keane, 2000). As rationalism, science, nationalism, liberal democratic political theory and other post-Enlightenment developments have become increasingly influential, secularization theorists have argued that these must inevitably displace, and eventually replace, the role of religions in society. Just over one hundred years ago, most 'secular progressives' assumed that religions would gradually become increasingly marginal as social and political forces (Marquand and Nettler, 2000). Indeed, Keane (2000:5) cites Berger (1969:108) to argue that there was a widespread expectation that once this process started, it would rapidly gather pace through its own momentum:

"Th[is] outcome is said to be self-reinforcing - secularisation produces a crisis of credibility of religion, which in turn feeds 'a widespread collapse of the plausibility of traditional religious definitions of reality'."

As these processes took hold, it was argued, it would be increasingly possible to explain people's choices and actions without reference to religion by using other social, economic and political factors.

However, more recently, many major sociological and political science studies have shown that religion has not followed its assigned pattern of decline and individualisation, nor even been relegated to a residual role. Instead, religions are in the process of re-asserting themselves as a significant global socio-political force in a diverse range of complex contexts and ways (Haynes, 1998; Marquand and Nettler, 2000; Bruce, 2003). The sheer scale of this diversity is impossible to capture comprehensively country by country, and the resulting picture is frequently made more complex by the way religion can become embedded in particular cultures and sets of socio-political relationships.

Hence, this literature review highlights key issues and trends focusing on the relationship between religion, social action and the state. To do this, the literature review draws on a wide range of related studies to illustrate the complex ways that these trends can affect and be affected by particular local contexts where they become manifest. In doing so,

the aim is to illuminate the situated nature of the English context by setting it against a broader background of contested citizenships, globalisation, identities, hegemonies and other changing aspects of contemporary societies.

By exploring the different ways in which religions can become embedded in diverse cultures in relation to these themes, the scene is set for research into the English context by sensitising the research project to issues of broader contestation, having considered some of the myriad ways these are being managed in alternative contexts.

2.3 Religious Identity and Understanding in an Age of Globalisation, Consumerism and Postmodernism

In examining why secularisation remains a contested process, and why religions continue to exert significant socio-political forces, this section highlights three contested concepts which summarise some of the key social changes forming the context for the resurgence of religion.

The first of these contested concepts is globalisation, which Dower and Williams (2002:xxii) define as:

> "the economic, political and cultural process whereby individuals and corporate bodies increasingly perform actions which have

impacts across/throughout the world, and perceive themselves as having identities, concerns and impacts which are global."

This notion of increased inter-connectivity is argued to involve up to four separate dimensions[1]:

(i) Time-Space compression resulting from technological innovation and application. This increases the density of connections and the speed of travel/communication to the extent that distance and spatial location cease to be as important as the extent of your connection; that is, how long it takes to get somewhere/something (e.g. information), rather than how far away it is in absolute geographical terms (Brunn and Leinback, 1991; Castells, 1996);

(ii) Economic globalisation - the effect of new technology, enlarged trade and decreased capital controls on increasingly instantaneous, inter-linked and inter-dependent financial markets and investment (Deakin, 1998);

(iii) Political globalisation - relating to the increasingly global dimensions of power dynamics (Deakin, 1998);

---

[1] I am indebted to Nick Ellison for presenting globalisation in this helpful way.

(iv)   Cultural globalisation, concerning the dynamics of increasing communication and flows between cultures and the effect of this on those cultures, particularly in terms of debates over heterogeneity / homogeneity (Urry, 2000).

The increased interconnectivity resulting from these changes has profoundly affected the social, economic and political context in which religions and other worldviews increasingly encounter and interact with each other.

This changing context is further highlighted by the alternative understanding provided by interdisciplinary consumption theories. These highlight the far-reaching consequences engendered by fundamental social and economic transformations associated with consumerism, placing ideas of market-based choice at the heart of social interactions in large parts of the world (Miller, 1995). Such changes have arguably raised widespread awareness of different individual, social and even theological possibilities whilst increasingly raising expectations that individuals can choose between them, or even mix-and-match several possibilities to create their own new ones. For traditionally stable primary sources of exclusive identity such as religion, ethnicity and nationality, these changes are profoundly challenging.

One could make a case that globalisation and consumerism are processes which have been increasingly present since the beginning of trade and

technological development. However, there is particular concern over the pace of change in the contemporary context, to the extent that some theorists see a radical break with the apparent certainties of the rationalist and modernist Enlightenment period. To capture the notion of this supposed radical break, the term 'postmodern' is frequently used. This term is perhaps even more contested than globalisation, as rather than defining itself in terms of its own substance, it instead defines itself in terms of the modernist period it supposedly follows. Whilst this severely limits its theoretical usefulness, the term has come into widespread usage in a number of fields, not least in academic debate on culture. What this term does helpfully capture, in ways that other terms such as globalisation and consumerism do not, is the cultural shift in prevalent understandings of the nature of truth and reality. It reflects the sense that society is moving from a position where there is a hope that an understanding of the truth of a matter can be attained by sufficiently diligent study (the 'Enlightenment dream'), to a position whereby the concept of 'truth' itself is coming progressively under attack. As a result of this attack, many theorists argue for the relativistic position that there is no such thing as the truth independent of the observer, but only a pluralistic concept of infinite 'truths' depending on where you stand (Schaeffer, 1998). This is intimately entangled in constructivist conceptual approaches, which assert that:

"all reality, including all concepts, are socially constructed. ... This does not mean that this socially constructed world is an illusion, but that it is not pregiven. ... Indeed, to claim that the socially constructed world is an illusion suggests that there is a more real world behind the illusion. But this belief that the real world is separate from us and our perceptions of it is denied by late- and post-modernists. It is not simply that the real world is unavailable to us and we misunderstand what is real, but instead it is our perceptions and categories that both represent and participate in our construction of the world." (Powell, 1999:142)

One symbol of this is that even the physical sciences, founded on Enlightenment approaches and the source of the technological developments argued to be central to globalisation (Castells, 1996), are increasingly finding themselves wrestling with radically incompatible paradigms and paradoxes, unable to integrate these into an ultimate "theory of everything" (Greene, 2000).

However, the implications of these challenges extend much deeper than just the physical sciences, since they create profound challenges for any universal worldview which people collectively use to understand their own identity and place in society. Cray (1998:7) argues that:

"Postmodern theory challenges the credibility of 'grand narratives' – stories or beliefs which provide the key to the overall meaning of life."

This particularly affects religions, which purport to provide the principal source of such narratives, and hold them to be (often uniquely) true. At the same time, when combined with the broader changes associated with globalisation, these changes deconstruct many of the certainties of previous group identities. This leaves us with an individualised set of choices around which we construct and maintain our own identity narrative (Bauman, 2000). Bauman introduces the concept of 'liquid modernity' to capture these important changes, noting the differences in the current form of modernity compared to the previous form. In particular, he notes that what becomes abandoned in the wake of these changes is the illusion that there is some perfect end-state to which society is progressing. In turn, this change in perspective throws many aspects of current social 'progress' into doubt. The resulting disorientation, when compounded by the abandoning of ideas of public truth, makes it supremely difficult to found any universally-shared rationale for changing individuals or society for the better, since there can be no common conception of 'the good' to work towards or inform one's actions. For religions which hold that their beliefs are true not just for the individuals who hold them but for everybody, in situations where these religious individuals and institutions are accustomed to

substantial input into moral and even legal pronouncements in support of this view, these changes are profoundly challenging.

Whatever position one takes on the merits of understanding these social changes in terms of globalisation and postmodernism, the rapidity of social change and the resultant uncertainty has fundamentally affected people's relationships. Castells (1996:3) describes how these changes have a profound link with identity:

> "In ... a world of uncontrolled, confusing change, people tend to regroup around primary identities: religious, ethnic, territorial, national. .... In a world of global flows of wealth, power and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning."

Yet at the same time as this regrouping around traditional primary identities, this section has shown how these primary identities are themselves under threat. Ethnic identities, state citizenship and political/religious worldviews are being challenged by increasing flows of citizens, cultures and ideas across increasingly permeable boundaries (Dawson, 1999b). In addition, sources of primary identity such as religion are confronted with an individuals' ability to construct or choose at least some aspects of their own identity for themselves.

2.4 Relationships Between States, Organised Religions and Individuals

In this complex context, the relationships between religion, ethnicity, citizenship and identity are the subject of much cross-disciplinary work around the world. A primary focus of this work concerns how states, organised religions and individuals should relate to each other. This relationship arguably has at least three different, but inter-related, dimensions. The first dimension is the relationship between a particular state and formal organised religious institutions – i.e. the extent to which particular religious organisation/s may or may not be established in the sense of receiving formal recognition, status and perhaps privileges in the state structure (often in return for playing a role in the construction of the nationalised identity). A second dimension is the relationship between the state and public expressions of religion in the political decision-making process and civil society. A third dimension is the extent of state involvement in making available or attempting to constrain individual choice on matters seen as being related to religion, and the framework within which such involvement operates. All three of these dimensions have a significant bearing on the role of religion in any one particular society. By recognising these different dimensions, a number of different broad models of relationship can be observed.

The formal relationship between a state and organised religious institutions has typically involved the establishment of one particular strand of a religious tradition into a privileged position as the state religion (Hirst, 2000). This relationship has involved varying degrees of co-option and collusion between these different sources of power and legitimation. However, this has by no means been the only response, with variations on two main alternative options being adopted in a number of contexts.

The first alternative option has been the rejection of any role at all for religion or religious institutions, as for example in the post-revolution creation of the modern French republican state, or in the strict interpretation of some communist states. (Strictly speaking, this could also be argued to be the case for the USA, based on some readings of the USA constitution, although the USA is an interesting case, particularly because of the role of civil religion and political manoeuvring implicating religion; see Bennett, 1983; Perry, 1997; also see Section 2.5). In situations such as this, where organised religion has been denied an official role, religion has nevertheless often remained important as a robust repository of alternative culture, beliefs and even resistance. This role has proved to be especially influential in conflict situations and under repressive regimes, such as the role of the Catholic Church in Poland during Russian Communist rule (O'Mahony, 2005). (For other examples, see Section 2.7). In such situations, the ability of a particular

organised religion to adopt this repository role appears to be dependent on whether that religion has been successfully neutered by accepting a politically-compromising settlement in support of the regime (Bruce, 2003). This has not only happened where the state has been anti-religious; it has also happened equally where the state has supported or established one particular denomination or religion, and an alternative denomination or religion has taken on the oppositional role.

A second alternative option has been where the state has decided to recognise a number of different religious groups present within its boundaries and attempt to integrate this difference within its state structure. Many examples of this are built on variations of the Ottoman Empire's millet system (Bruce, 2003), although there are examples from other faiths; for example, Douglas (1983) charts Christian Presbyterian historical responses which share much in common with the millet system.

As Bruce (2003:16-20) outlines, the millet system explicitly recognised one religion as the basis for ultimate political legitimacy and all law; in the case of the Ottoman Empire, this religion was Islam, which did not make any cultural or religious distinction between secular and sacred. However, the millet system did allow for some tolerance of certain other religions (in this case, Christianity and Judaism, as both share the same Old Testament and other common roots with Islam). Those belonging to these other religions were not expected to follow Muslim law, and hence

their leaders were given a degree of civil autonomy as well as religious authority over the members of these religious communities, to regulate themselves according to their own laws, customs and practices. However, the system was hierarchically arranged so that in the event of a dispute, the Islamic sharia prevailed. In practice, as Bruce notes, other religious communities were subordinated, subject to additional taxes, and had one in four young men between the ages of 10 and 20 taken from them every five years to be converted, educated and made to serve in an aspect of Ottoman service.

This historic approach has been adapted in a number of more recent contexts. Rudolph and Rudolph (2000) highlight India as a prime example of this, using this country as a case study to illustrate the effects of such a system in a more contemporary context. Here, the colonial doctrine and practice of the East India Company initially built on the millet system. However, as Rudolph and Rudolph detail, this approach entrenched difference, especially when complicated by imperialist and nationalist ambitions. The legacy of the Moghul and Raj, combined with inter-group tension between religiously-identifying communities, has led to a complex development of both individual and group-related rights within self-governing civil communities. Latterly, these have become linked by an emerging uniform civil code. In legal terms, this has produced various dilemmas over the balance between individual rights and group customs/laws. In political terms, this has

produced political decision-making shaped by the fear of democracy turning into the 'tyranny of the majority'. Whilst the rise of individual rights challenged some of these religious traditions and judgements, the system has continued to receive political support because group rights were seen as a defence against majoritarianism in a deeply divided society, preserving group entitlements to power and positions of authority through various caste-based allocation schemes. In this respect, Rudolph and Rudolph argue that India provides an excellent example of the conflict between contradictory trends of legal pluralism (based on individual faith communities developing and enforcing their own laws/rules/rights) and legal universalism (the development of a common national code and equal citizenship rights regardless of group identity).

Elsewhere, however, religious identities and institutions have often played an even more central role in the nation-building process, to the extent that Bruce (2003) considers religious heritage and identity to be intimately associated with nationalism and the evolution of the modern state. This role has typically entailed a particular religion being co-opted into the dual tasks of emphasising a uniformity of collective identity and history to form a basis for solidarity and providing a precursor to a state administrative and social welfare structure.

The epitome of this identification of religion and religious institutions with nationalism and the state can be found in the complex relationship

between religion and national identity in Zionism (Ottolenghi, 2000). Here, 'Jewish-ness' is a contested concept necessarily incorporating a defining religious identity into citizenship, whilst the secular state-building project clashes with the diasporic religious tradition. These tensions necessitate uneasy compromises between religious hierarchy and democratic leadership.

This is also a helpful reminder that even where states have privileged or incorporated a particular religion as part of their nationalistic project, this act in itself does not automatically resolve any tensions. Nor does this act necessarily prevent any future potential role for religion in subsequent social change or conflict in this setting. Northern Ireland provides one high profile example of this. Here, Protestant/Catholic religious denominational affiliations are frequently treated as synonymous with Loyalist/Republican politics, with the tensions between these groups often leading to separated everyday lives (Crouch, 2000). Indeed, Crouch argues that, for Northern Ireland, religion has been a particularly crucial and emotive factor which has taken on a primary role in demarcating difference as society has structured itself around religious affiliation in a conflict situation. Nevertheless, religious figures and beliefs have also played significant roles within related peace-building processes in such nations too (Appleby, 2003).

Overall, the sheer diversity of ways in which religion can become socially and politically embedded leaves it difficult to draw more detailed

generalisations across countries and cultures. In fact, detailed studies of even similar countries show how local circumstances and history can result in different trajectories in terms of how this relationship becomes manifest. For example, Zubaida's (2000) study of the similarities and differences in the role of political Islam in three Middle Eastern countries shows how local circumstances and history have resulted in different trajectories for the manifestation of this relationship. However, broader studies have begun to show how differences in the nature, structure and belief systems of particular religions, and the ways that these are applied in particular local contexts, can have a significant impact on the resulting social outcomes. For example, Bruce (2003) notes the differences between orthodox and orthoprax religions in their socio-political manifestations. A further example is McGuire's (1992) work, which shows how different authority structures and ideas of religious leadership can have a significant impact on the sustainability of a particular religious group's engagement in action for social change.

There is much more that could be said about these huge issues of religion, the state and identity, and the ways that they interact, which cannot be covered comprehensively here. However, this section has shown how rapid social change is fragmenting previously cohesive combinations of national, religious and local bases of identity (Sacks, 2002). The exact dynamics of these changes have taken on distinct, highly varied characteristics depending on the particular local

circumstances (Haynes, 1998) and the particular socio-political characteristics that the prevalent religion/s tend to promote (Bruce, 2003). At the same time, an increased awareness and co-location of difference has engendered rich and highly contended fields of work relating to how societies, groups and governments can and should deal with these differences (Perry, 1997; Shah, 2000; Griffiths, 2001). In this context, religions are increasingly being seen as important factors in shaping individual and corporate action oriented around social change. However, before we consider the nature of this role more directly, it is important to further explore the factors which led to the development of a liberal pluralist context in the West. As the next section shows, a critical analysis of this context shows that liberal pluralism has not resolved all the difficulties associated with dealing with religious and ethnic difference in the socio-political sphere. In the process of attempting to deal with these difficulties, liberal pluralism has contributed to the creation of additional difficulties. As the next section will show, these difficulties arise most notably because of liberal pluralism's relativistic approaches to worldviews, and the various forms of fundamentalism which frequently back-lash against it.

2.5 Liberal Pluralism and Fundamentalism

The Historical Development of Liberal Pluralism in the West

The historical interaction between different strands of religious and political thought has had a profound impact on their relationship in the current Western context. Millbank (1990) charts how the very notion of a secular socio-political realm independent of religion required theological developments in Western Christianity which enabled this distinction. A key political landmark in this development was the Westphalian accord that followed the religious wars which decimated 16th and 17th century Europe (Shah, 2000). As a result, organised religion in Europe became more accepting of secular state boundaries. This included generally recognising the authority of states to manage religious differences within their boundaries.

In order to handle this, many Western states developed forms of liberal pluralism as a basis from which to manage the relationships between religious groups (and indeed, between religious groups and those holding alternative worldviews). In practise, this meant many states developed a secular humanist character, despite occasional attempts to develop some form of civil religion, since as Shah (2000:125) states:

> "There was (and is) no neutral way of perceiving the fact of religious diversity, much less any given solution."

To resolve the resulting tensions, Shah argues that states adopted the ecumenical scheme proposed by Grotius (1988), which involved separating out doctrinal differences from practical ethical and moral precepts. This enabled a broader social consensus to be established on social and political matters, whilst recognising that individual values and beliefs would still be fundamentally informed by more particular perspectives, whether religious or atheistic. Rawls (1996) developed these ideas further in setting out a liberalism based on 'reasonableness', which includes a recognition that reasonable people disagree over many questions of judgement and fact. This means that everyone:

> "must, in effect, acknowledge that there are good reasons for denying [their] own truth-claims, because there is much to be said on all sides." (Shah, 2000:134)

The ostensible reasons for these changes include an attempt to enable freedom for all through democracy whilst at the same time protecting the nature of true faith through pluralism, separation and disestablishment.

Problematising the Relationship Between Liberal Pluralism and Other Worldviews

This historical liberal secular pluralistic response to the challenge of managing different religious perspectives in a particular state has since come under increasing pressure for a number of reasons.

Firstly, in adopting a relativistic pluralistic stance, this approach fails to take seriously the comprehensiveness of individual worldviews. By their nature, such worldviews are, in Griffiths' (2001:xiv) terms, "a form of life that seems to those who belong to it to be comprehensive, incapable of abandonment, and of central importance". Whilst Griffiths uses this as a definition of religion, this definition applies equally to other worldviews, including strident forms of atheism such as that advocated by Dawkins (2007). The very process of putting all such views on a doctrinal par with each other is highly controversial to those holding them.

Secondly, in practice, it has been a relatively short step from a consensus-based liberal pluralistic approach to a very different form of secularism. This form of secularism is advocated by Rorty (1994) as 'the Jeffersonian compromise'. This position starts from the assumption that any role for religion in the public domain acts as a "conversation stopper" which threatens communication between citizens because of its "silence, antagonism, bigotry and threats of violence nurtured by the dogmatic reference to religious fundamentals." (Keane, 2000:9). Keane summarises the resultant effects as follows:

> "A democratic polity thus has no choice but to enforce a pact:
> religious believers must be guaranteed their freedom to worship
> their God in private in exchange for non-believers' entitlement to

live without religious bigotry and deception within the public

domains of civil society and the state." (p.9)

This version of secularism, which endeavours to remove the right of

religion to have any role in the public sphere, has led to many legal and

political challenges (Douglas, 1983; Perry, 1997; Griffiths, 2001). At its

most basic level, it can result in a denial of religious freedom of

expression through endeavouring to disconnect a person's meaning

system and worldview from their actions in a particular context. In some

settings, as this thesis will later discuss, this has given rise to a notion of

bureaucratic or professional 'neutrality' which separates personal

worldviews from those required by people acting in a particular state-

sanctioned or permitted role. Given the wider evidence of the impact of

religious beliefs and other worldviews on individual identity and social

interaction, the plausibility of this separation is difficult to countenance

(Perry, 1997). However, we should note that not all religions agree with

integrating their faith with involvement in politics and collective action;

in fact, there is a strong tradition for separating religion and politics in

many religions, including Jehovah's Witnesses (Watchtower, 2004).

In practice, where the more extreme form of secularism has been

influential, it has led to significant constraints on the public role of

religion in an attempt to relegate religion solely to the private sphere of

life. For all worldviews which claim some wider public role and

relevance, it is precisely this denial of their all-encompassing nature and

role in the public sphere which those who hold them cannot accept. For these, the true intention of these changes can be seen in very different terms, as a domination of particular religiously-informed perspectives for the purpose of imposing a different ideological hegemony. This has added to the perceived threats to religious identity and religiously-informed social/political action arising from the dynamics of globalisation and postmodernism outlined earlier in this thesis, often in situations exacerbated by relative disadvantage. As we will now consider, fundamentalism has been one particularly important and prevalent response which has emerged in response to these combined perceived threats.

Fundamentalism as One Response to These Problems

As many religious groups in the West have found their identity, belief systems and practices increasingly under threat from this combination of liberal pluralism, globalisation and postmodernism, they have sought to find ways to respond to the challenges of encountering different identities, beliefs and practices in different ways. At their most extreme, these responses have been perceived as hostile to the core tenets of Western civilisation, leading to Huntingdon's (1996) prediction of a "clash of civilisations".

Even before the present political obsession with forms of fundamentalism claiming to be inspired by Islam, Castells (1996:3) had

noted the importance of fundamentalism in socio-political identity and action:

> "Religious fundamentalism .... is probably the most formidable force of personal security and collective mobilization in these troubled years."

Following the terrorist atrocities of September 11th, 2001 (together with subsequent terrorist attacks and foreign policy developments, not least the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq), forms of fundamentalism claiming Islamist identities have become the new folk-devil of all that opposes Western self-identity and interests. Such problems are not limited to one religion or even just to religions themselves; as Barnes (2002) notes, there are fundamentalist groups within almost all faith traditions, and many liberal secular worldviews are held with similar tenacity. Despite this, some theorists (e.g. Bruce, 2003) have argued that some religions are more prone to fundamentalism due to the particular configuration of their historical development and theological tendencies.

Of particular relevance to this thesis are the alternative forms of fundamentalism claiming Christian identities which can be found even in the dominant Western superpower, the United States of America. These have developed close relationships with both the state and forms of civil religion in the country, despite the nominally secular American constitution. These forms of fundamentalism can be understood as a

response to the uncertainty generated by contemporary social changes amongst the disenfranchised, making them susceptible to manipulation by particular interests (Shriver, 1983; Perkin, 2000). Perkin's analysis is particularly trenchant, highlighting how the American leaders of fundamentalist movements have become part of big business, making profits by selling God to their followers and turning themselves, as Chief Executive Officers, into multi-millionaires. By contrast, Perkin shows how the fears and vulnerabilities of fundamentalist followers affected by the negative side-effects of global capitalism are exploited by these leaders in the interests of a right wing political agenda.

The resulting fundamentalist belief systems are challenged by both mainstream alternative Christian responses (Marsden, 1983) and more liberal Christian responses (Miller, 1981; Reader, 1994). Despite these challenges, fundamentalists have acquired a large impact in terms of the visible face of Christianity in the West, affecting how Christians more generally are perceived when they engage in social action. In the American context, this visible face has been built on the organisation and mobilisation of an effective political lobby, combined with a large degree of control over any specialist media which is labelled as 'Christian'. In this way, Daly (2001) highlights how American far right fundamentalists have sought to claim mainstream legitimacy and authenticity, and in the process have sought to establish themselves in the public sphere as the sole 'true' Christian perspective. This has had

profound effects in terms of encouraging the development of a Christianised sub-culture as a particular market niche to maximise potential profits.

There are two main reasons why these developments are crucially important to this thesis. Firstly, these manoeuvres have arguably enabled those groups with fundamentalist tendencies to gain a disproportionate amount of influence in terms of politics, resources and the shape of substantial Christian sub-cultures. This influence has frequently crossed the Atlantic to have repercussions in the English context (not least in terms of the theological position of many of the available training materials for Christian community and youth workers).

Of course, Christian fundamentalism is not only to be found in America, and many different denominations and faiths have been affected by different fundamentalist tendencies in the contemporary context. It is the nature of these broader fundamentalist tendencies which forms the basis of the second main reason why fundamentalism is important in this thesis. This second reason is that fundamentalists have a distinctive approach to dealing with different worldviews, whether these are entirely different (e.g. another religion) or just different variations on their own worldview (e.g. another denomination's interpretation within the same religion). The distinctiveness of this fundamentalist outlook is not just that fundamentalists claim to possess some universal truths which they apply to everybody (as all worldviews might be argued to

do). Rather, it is because fundamentalists claim to possess the only valid application of a religion, which they consider should be applied universally irrespective of socio-political context. Moreover, this application is usually based on a literalistic reading of particular key texts, and entirely intolerant of any other interpretation or value/belief system.

However, whilst such absolute fundamentalist responses to the changes in religious identity have informed some faith-based social action, these have not been the only philosophical or theological responses made by Christians to the challenge of the changing socio-political context. Various alternative theoretical responses have been developed to retain the integrity of a Christian worldview whilst taking into account the increasing awareness of difference. It is to these alternative theological responses that we will now turn.

Alternative Approaches to Dealing with Difference

By definition, worldviews (including those deriving from religions) have fundamental problems integrating alternative worldviews with integrity. This is because religious worldviews are, in Geertz's (1999:179) terms:

> "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods in men [sic] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these

conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic"

As religions have come into increasing contact with each other, many religious people have struggled to understand what their greater awareness of religious diversity might mean for their own faith tradition. To cite a few examples, Murray (1993) outlines Catholic struggles with pluralism, Sacks (2002) presents a Jewish approach and Newbigin (1989) explores an ecumenical Christian approach. For others, the central theological task has been to concentrate on generating greater inter-faith understanding (or at least dialogue) (e.g. Barnes, 2002).

Griffiths (2001) argues that there are three different philosophical aspects which need to be taken into account in order to accommodate experiences of encountering different people holding different worldviews.

The first aspect is the different approaches which groups might have to **relationships with those who hold different worldviews.** These include (i) toleration; (ii) separation (in total/partial and comprehensive/non-comprehensive varieties); and (iii) conversion (with both comprehensive and noncomprehensive evangelical varieties, and different methods of either compulsion, persuasion or presentation). These approaches to others are based on the second aspect, which involves the different possible forms of **relationship between the claims of different**

worldviews. Griffiths summarises these as being *compatible* if both claims can be true at the same time, "*contradictory* if both can't be true and one must be; *contrary* if both can't be true and neither need be; *noncompossible* if each prescribes a course of action and it's impossible for one person to perform both" (p. xiv; emphasis in original). These in turn depend on the third aspect, which involves the **different approaches to where truth can be found**: "*exclusivism* with respect to truth is the view that true religious claims are only found among the doctrines and teachings of the home religion. *Inclusivism* … is the view that it is possible that both the home religion and alien religions teach truth; in its *open* variety, it affirms the possibility that some alien religion may teach truths not already explicitly taught by the home religion, while in its *closed* variety it denies this possibility." (pp. xiv – xv; emphasis in original)

Griffiths also highlights that one of the main reasons that the relationship between people holding different worldviews is so contested is that these worldviews tend to hold different understandings of what is a person's "proper end, the fulfilment of [their] purpose" (p. xv) (or indeed, whether they have such a proper end or purpose). In addition, different worldviews tend to have different perspectives on what belonging to a religion might have to do with achieving this goal, which he terms 'salvation', and how many ultimately achieve it. Depending on one's convictions about such matters, these can have profound impacts

on how an individual or group might approach others who are perceived as different to them, and the extent to which they are open to learning as a result of the encounter. This analysis also highlights why religious and other worldviews are frequently at the heart of debates over moral, ethical and teleological concerns, since they relate to questions of ultimate purpose and/or meaning, and hence ultimately relate to the heart of what it means to be human. As a result, it is not just fundamentalists who may ultimately have difficulties with liberalised attempts to individualise, privatise and relativise their beliefs. This is because the removal from public discourse of those aspects which orient individuals and groups to the world around them affects everyone, especially those who hold worldviews which clash with the liberal pluralist perspective.

This is not to say that all of these approaches, and the attitudes they engender, are necessarily helpful contributors to the potential of people to live together in diverse communities. Nor is it to say that there should not be ethical debate over which of these approaches may be proper, or that all these options (up to and including conversion by compulsion) should be politically tolerated in any society. However, it is important to recognise the depth of convictions involved, and the differing structures of theological belief and thought which contribute to these convictions. Without understanding this, it is common (but inaccurate) to set religious thought as a whole up against secular thought

as a whole, and wrongly equate tolerance exclusively with the latter rather than the former.

These distinctions also highlight that, whilst fundamentalists of whichever persuasion may find it unthinkable to engage with difference in any way other than confrontationally, there are alternatives for the majority of those holding particular worldviews[2]. Many of those who hold religious beliefs equally strongly may at the very least accept a certain amount of potential fallibility in their or their traditions' own interpretation of the central Divine messages. As Griffiths (2001) notes, this might be understood in academic and philosophical terms as accepting that there is a difference between debates about the possibility of ontological truth in abstract, and debates about epistemic confidence in particular circumstances. Theologically, this is recognised as being the challenge of contextualising the implications of a particular faith into a specific changed context (Newbigin, 1989). This highlights the importance of taking seriously the theological understandings and faith of those engaged in religiously-motivated social action. As Gillat-

---

[2] In terms of communicating with Christian fundamentalists, Marsden (1983) argues that the best approach is to take their literal interpretation of the Bible seriously, in order to establish a level for communication from which their fundamentalism can be challenged, not least by using the clear messages against religious intolerance advocated by Jesus in the Gospels.

Ray (2003) shows, it is particularly important that the development of reflective theological capabilities is prioritised in religious leaders and (by implication) others who engage with difference in their everyday lives and/or practice.

There is not space here to develop a detailed Christian theological argument around the nature and difficulties of contextualisation in the contemporary context (for which, see Newbigin, op cit). However, the Biblical example of Jesus' approach to difference is indicative in the way He radically shook up his followers' limited conceptions of God and challenged them to see that God's love and plan were bigger than their own individual experiences and legalistic traditions.

A religious accommodation with pluralism on this level opens up the possibility of debate between those of different religious and non-religious persuasions. In practice, such debate must also draw on threads from the shared or other persons' belief framework, if the parties are to understand each other and be able to make connections between each others' worldviews. Such an encounter-based approach, however, which takes seriously the religious worldviews and identities of those involved, is very different from the contradictory notion that such interactions can best take place through a 'neutral' secular intermediary. It is also very different from the stereotypical fundamentalism which claims much more of the public and media attention.

Whatever approach is taken to managing relationships between different groups with different beliefs, there are clearly challenges for secular and religious individuals, non-governmental groups, organisations and communities as they try to work out how they should respond to those with different worldviews, as well as those with different views on a wide range of social issues. These relational dynamics are further complicated by the patterns of disadvantage and identity politics which have arisen as a result of theories surrounding 'race' and their impact on societies, as we will now consider.

2.6 Ethnicity and 'Race'

One aspect of the increasing awareness of different worldviews, identities and relationships between citizen and state has been heated academic and political debates on ethnicity and the contested concept of 'race' (Miles and Torres, 1999). At the heart of these debates is extensive evidence that both political power and relative advantage/disadvantage are frequently distributed across societies in ways which are highly correlated with ethnicity (see, for example, Modood et al, 1997 for British data). This evidence has combined with extensive analysis of the way in which societies have developed in such a way as to systemically entrench these differences and exacerbate difficulties in relationships between ethnic groups (Small, 1999). In response, the concept of 'race' has frequently been wielded both to

'justify' the oppression of particular ethnic groups (Guillaumin, 1999) on the basis of supposed biological distinctions and also sometimes by such groups to form a sense of solidarity and common identity as a basis for resisting this oppression (Mirón, 1999).

As such, both ethnicity and 'race' are potentially crucial factors in this study, due to their relationship with matters of religion, faith, identity, politics and citizenship in the current global context. They are particularly pertinent in terms of the debates over discrimination and prejudice which are associated with both ethnicity and religion (see, for example, Weller et al, 2001, for British data on religious discrimination and how this relates to ethnicity). Whilst these differences in treatment and socio-economic position are frequently presented in terms of 'race', the terms 'race', 'ethnicity' and 'religion' are frequently conflated with each other and used interchangeably in social and political discourse, especially when there is perceived to be popular political capital to be exploited by such a usage. This can be seen, for example, in the frequent use of religious referents in media discourses portraying asylum seekers from different ethnic backgrounds as the latest post-Cohen (1987) 'folk devils', and even in professional responses to perceived confusions in Government policy; as one Director of Social Services was recently quoted by a church infrastructure body to have said:

> "We are being told by the government that we need to include people from faith communities. We do not know what this means

and are awaiting further guidance, but we assume it means people from black and ethnic minorities." (Farnell, Furbey et al, 2003:5)

This confusion is exacerbated by the language of 'races' and 'racism', given that the idea that ethnic differences amount to some scientifically-justifiable discrete biological 'races' is widely discredited (Guillaumin, 1999; Small, 1999:48). The continuing usage of this language has the effect of lending misplaced legitimacy to terms which really owe their existence to the flawed assumptions and socio-economic decisions of the past, and the way that these have shaped the present. However, it also seems nonsensical to deny the existence of differences between those groups that have been labelled as different 'races', when there is widespread evidence of the impact of a racialized discourse on society that has affected their relative socio-economic status. In practice, denying difference in this regard can have the practical effect of supporting the status quo in terms of ingrained difference and relative disadvantage.

Small (1999) argues that whilst using the concept of 'race' can cause more problems than it solves, an awareness and sensitivity to the "racialization problematic" remains important. This involves acknowledging that "ideas and beliefs about "race", both at present and in the past, have shaped ... relationships [between groups who have been differently defined by these ideas]" (Small, 1999:49), whilst also

acknowledging the importance of other factors (e.g. economics) in these relationships.

An awareness of these conceptual issues is crucially important for this study as it provides some critical distance from which to analyse phenomena such as 'political correctness' which have affected community work in this confused context. As such, the concept of 'race' presents a good illustration of the ways that the social construction of key terms can have a profound impact on many of the key controversies encountered in this field (Powell, 1999).

But lest we should get entangled in this murky debate, it is helpful to remind ourselves that even ethnicity and religion are not synonymous concepts. However, their relationship is perhaps closest in the case of Judaism (as discussed in section 2.4 above), whilst involving frequent correlations for other ethnic groups in many less strict senses (Smith, 2004a). As we have seen in section 2.5 above, religion also involves a formation around shared beliefs (and usually customs and rituals too), with these beliefs frequently set up as the sole or most important truth, and often counterposed with all other beliefs which are labelled deficient or false to the extent that they disagree with the primary faith set of beliefs. It is the combination of these elements of different worldviews, identities, social relationships, disadvantages and politics which have together been key factors in shaping the current global position of religion.

As Haynes (1998:1) recognises, the global impact of these combined elements of religious identity and social interaction has meant that religion, counter to expectation, is re-emerging as a significant social force:

> "In short, refusing to be condemned to the realm of privatised belief, religion is once again reappearing in the public sphere, thrusting itself into issues of moral and political contestation."

In this context, it is no longer plausible to ignore religion as a 'hangover from the past' which might be expected to disappear given time, and hence stop causing problems for the emergent, increasingly rational and liberal secular society. Instead, a more nuanced approach is required which considers the complexity of the interaction between religion and wider society in particular places, especially in terms of individual and social change, to which we now turn.

2.7 Religion and Action for Social Change

Faith, Conflict and Reconstruction

The emergent realisation that religion continues to play an active social role has led to international concern about the nature and possibilities of this role in the changing context. With religion becoming implicated in some forms of terrorism, government concerns have often focused on

security, as governments have sought to understand the nature of links between religion, radicalisation and violence (e.g. Choudhury, 2007). However, as this section will explore, various independent studies show that religious faith (as a personally and socially owned worldview) can also be an important factor contributing to work for peace and social justice. These studies have highlighted a range of ways in which religion can be used to play this more positive role.

Some of these studies have focused on exploring the ways that religious faith might be used constructively within international diplomacy and peace-building (Appleby, 2003; Johnston, 2003; Johnston and Cox, 2003). When working in areas of the world where religion is a factor in intra- or international conflict, these approaches seek to draw on the normative values within particular religious traditions which point towards principles for living peacefully together and resolving disputes. (For example, see Nyang and Johnston, 2003, on the way that conflict resolution can be seen as a normative value in Islamic law.)

Other studies have focused on the potential role which religious theologies might play in contributing towards national reconstruction following a crisis, such as in the rebuilding of a new notion of nationhood in post-apartheid South Africa (Villa-Vicencio, 1992). The South African experience is particularly poignant, given the support which had been given by some Christian denominations to the previous apartheid regime. However, this example also illustrates how connecting international

efforts to promote human rights with religious values can help these rights to be mobilised and communicated effectively on the ground. These approaches may even have potential in areas where nationhood is contested, such as Kashmir (Embree, 2003).

Perhaps one of the most contested examples of the way that religiously-motivated groupings can contribute towards social change in terms of conflict has been the developments associated with Christian liberation theology. Liberation theology developed initially in situations of social and political conflict across South America, in the face of dictatorial regimes. Here, churches (especially the Catholic Church) have been a force for social change through adopting a theological approach which involves a 'preferential option for the poor'. This approach has involved churches in developing grassroots community organisations ('Basic Ecclesial Communities'), actively promoting human rights and working to develop improved socio-economic conditions (Stone, 1983; McGuire, 1992). Liberation theology is based on a new approach to doing theology which is fundamentally more emancipatory, inclusive, holistic, contextual, reflective and dialogical, drawing on a model of local meetings grounded in individual and community experience (Gutierrez, 1999). The resulting movements are locally-grounded, but linked together as part of wider movements to change society (Dawson, 1999a). The wider cross-national hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church has both enabled this development and clashed with it at various times,

creating interesting tensions and dynamics as the movement has developed (Hebblethwaite, 1999; West, 1999).

Outside South America, this approach has had a lesser impact, although it has still been influential in other ways dependent on the local context (e.g. see Wielenga, 1999, on the way that liberation theology has had different effects in Asia). In the West, liberation theology has had a marked impact on the development of broader community work theory (Popple, 1995), informing the work of seminal theorists such as Freire (1972) and Gramsci (1971; 1975; 1977; 1978), as well as particular black and feminist movements (Grey, 1999). However, liberation theology has also attracted mainstream criticism for its relationship with Marxism (Winn, 1983; Turner, 1999), invocation to justify violence (Winn, 1983), focus on political rather than spiritual change (Winn, 1983) and weaknesses when moving beyond conflict to reconstruction (Villa-Vicencio, 1992, 1999).

Faith and International Development

In a wider context, the importance of religion has also been re-recognised for international development, across agencies as diverse as the World Bank, multinational aid agencies and local self-help/charitable groups (Clarke, 2005). The impact of religion in these agencies is longstanding, with many organisations having roots in faith-motivated

social action and/or missions (Plant, 2004). However, the exact continuing role of faith had often received less attention until recently.

As faith has become more visible on the political landscape, studies have begun to explore its effects on various aspects of development work, not least in terms of work on HIV/AIDS and sexual health issues (see, for example, Grills, 2006a, on the response of Christian faith-based organisations to HIV in India). Such work has often been able to increase its impact and effectiveness by engaging with the local belief systems and networks associated with faith communities. In doing so, the assumptions inherent in the original approaches have often been constructively challenged. This process has created interesting dynamics as a result of the need for broader coalitions and partnership working at both local and international levels.

Local dynamics have included tensions arising from the diverse presence of faith-based organisations in disadvantaged areas; for example, Winkler's (2006) study explores the reasons for the high presence of faith-based organisations in a particular area of Johannesburg, as well as the reasons for their failure to work together. International dynamics have included tensions between local and international non-governmental organisations working to address poverty, as shown by Muleri's (2006) work.

The impact of faith on international development has not just been restricted to the direct delivery of social welfare or charitable activities, either. Values arising from faith-based theological understandings have been central to political movements such as the Jubilee 2000 anti-debt campaign. This drew on Biblical notions of a periodic Jubilee year when debt should be cancelled to mobilise a broad range of constituencies (many through religious organisations and networks) to argue for the international writing-off of poor countries' debt (Hughes and Bennett, 1998). These have been echoed with the occasional formation of progressive coalitions against poverty, often in direct conflict with current government policy, in 'developed' countries like the USA (Beaumont, 2004).

However, the engaging of faith-related individuals, organisations and networks in these development activities has not always been simple or straightforward. Indeed, there is substantial evidence emerging through many of the studies cited above that this engagement can result in complex effects for the people and organisations concerned. These effects vary substantially depending on the context, and hence before considering the potential impact in England, it is important to consider the factors influencing the role of faith in Western welfare systems more broadly.

Faith in Western Welfare Systems

In many of the international development contexts outlined above, faith-based organisations have played an important role in welfare as the primary providers of welfare services in countries with residual or non-existent welfare states. This role was echoed historically in the development of Western welfare systems, with faith-based organisations and congregations (especially Christian ones) playing a central role in developing and delivering education, health and welfare provision. Such work often acted as a precursor to the development of a more substantial state role in welfare delivery (especially over the last 60 years) through the creation of statutory welfare systems based on universal or selective/contributory principles.

Where states took on this more substantial role, these developments had the effect of displacing much of the previously voluntary provision in these countries, including that provided by churches. In turn, this has resulted in changed expectations about the state's role and a reduction in the residual areas of welfare where state provision still does not reach. This is not to say that the increase in state responsibility for welfare was necessarily opposed by the churches; in fact, the reverse has often been the case. Whilst Christians and churches have been implicated in unjust systems (including slavery and apartheid), in many cases, prominent Christians and church spokespersons have also been amongst the most vociferous campaigners for social change to address

these injustices (Wallis, 2002). These campaigns included arguing for an increased state role to co-ordinate and even replace the existing voluntary provision which was seen as patchy and inadequate for addressing the full extent of social problems. Despite this overall pattern, the precise historical pattern and contemporary relationship between religion and welfare varies in complex ways between Western countries; see, for example, Yeung, Beckman et al (2006) for a comparative study across Europe.

The substantial involvement of states in welfare delivery has, however, been increasingly challenged by a number of factors. These have included the political and economic challenges of balancing an ever-increasing welfare bill against rising citizen expectations (George and Miller, 1994). They have also included an increasing realisation of the difficulties involved in practically challenging the complexity of 'wicked issues' such as poverty, requiring agencies to work more closely together to tackle these issues in an holistic way (For example, in the UK context, see Audit Commission, 2001; Glendinning et al, 2002; Gilchrist, 2003).

The state responses to these challenges have had an important impact on the current context in which the rediscovery of a potential role for faith in Western welfare provision has emerged. The twin desires to increase efficiency and reduce costs have led to many states introducing New Public Management techniques focused on improving public services through a combination of quasi-market principles and centralised

measures and controls (Pollitt, 2000). As part of these developments, governments have frequently sought to outsource multiple aspects of welfare provision to a range of delivery 'partners', who are expected to compete for contracts in market-style tenders (Pollitt, 2000). In the search for ever-more potential 'partners' able to deliver low-cost services which are able to reach diverse and difficult social groups, faith-based organisations have become the latest in a string of organisations including private firms and voluntary sector bodies to whom governments have turned. Even within the USA, with its constitutionally-strict demarcation between religion and the state, recent administrations have sought to 'bring faith back in' by using public policy to promote faith-based action in local communities (Carlson-Thies, 2006).

There are a range of reasons why religious congregations and faith-based organisations have been seen as particularly attractive potential 'partners' for governments in this process, not least the perceived assets, relationships and ideas which they are argued to bring to the process. For example, a number of international studies have shown a strong connection between religiosity and volunteering (see, for example, Yeung, 2004, on the Finnish context), making religiously-motivated volunteers an attractive source of free labour. In addition, 'faith communities' have received much attention in the debates and evidence from research conducted into forms of 'social capital' arising

from the work of Putnam (1993; 2000). (Chapter 3 includes a more detailed discussion of these concepts, rationales and evidence in the English context). At this stage, the crucial point to note is that these developments have resulted in a fundamental change in the relationship between faith-based organisations and the state. This change has involved moving from an original position involving voluntary provision of services irrespective of the state, to one where state control and contracts are a much more significant factor.

At the same time, social, legal and political changes have led to the development of what has been termed a 'risk society' (Beck, 1992), in which discourses around risk dominate decision-making and social interaction. These risk-focused discourses have increased the complexity and bureaucracy of delivering welfare services, having a profound impact on increasing debates around the need for professionalisation and 'quality standards' (Webb, 2006). When combined with New Public Management strategies, the net result is frequently a form of centralised managerialism which leaves practitioners and their immediate supervisors with little scope for personal reflection on the relationship between their values and practice (Kitchener, Kirkpatrick and Whipp, 2000), despite international studies and professional codes emphasising the importance of this reflection (Banks, 2004). Studies from different international contexts are only just beginning to explore the complex ways in which these factors are

affecting the changing face of welfare in general, and faith-related welfare in particular. However, the developing evidence in this field has begun to show that this context raises significant issues, questions and challenges for faith-related agencies and practitioners which have responded to these social welfare agendas. Landmark studies in this field include Wittberg's (2006) study of the changes experienced by a generation of nuns and deaconesses involved in the delivery of welfare in America. Grills' (2006b) work highlights further issues in terms of how conflicting agendas can result in what he terms organisational 'schizophrenia' for multilateral organisations as they engage with faith-based organisations. For some Christian denominations, the challenges associated with this changing context, together with their own internally-changing configurations, has meant gradually divesting themselves of large-scale welfare-related services into separate organisations. As Wittberg's (2006) American study and Conradson's (2006) study of several large Christian denominations in New Zealand shows, many of these separate organisations have subsequently become more secularised in their operation. For local Christian congregations in other contexts, the challenges on their doorstep have sometimes led to an increased involvement in local community development work; e.g. Perkins (1993) provides a good example of this in an American context. In still other places, this involvement in community work has gone even further to result in the development of broad-based coalitions to

campaign for socio-political change. These have often been more confrontational in their approach to the state, such as in the different international approaches influenced by Alinsky's (1971) approach to community organising (see, for example, Beaumont, 2004).

2.8 Conclusion – Religious Faith as a Significant Factor in Social Action

This chapter has outlined diverse ways in which religion has played a key role in social action for change, especially through its contributions to civil society in terms of the relationship between different worldviews and the development of welfare provision. This contribution has been varied and complex, as those involved have struggled to apply their faith to their own work in diverse contexts and integrate it with understanding from broader disciplines, including social policy, economics, theology, politics and management. Baker (2003:3) extends this list of academic disciplines with the potential to contribute to understanding this field even wider, including urban theory, theories of local civil society, social capital and regeneration; urban theology; cultural and political theory and anthropological theory.

The involvement of religious faith in such fields is a natural consequence of faith being understood as a comprehensive worldview, with the potential to affect every part of a person's individual, social and spiritual life. By understanding faith in these terms, faith can also be

related more easily with alternative worldviews, facilitating an analysis of difference which relates to both belief and action. This analysis, when applied to social action on social welfare issues, especially action involving socio-political relationships between groups holding different worldviews, impacts on the assumption that a 'neutral' secular state is the best arbiter of this difference. In contrast with this assumption, the potential role of faith in social action can be seen as controversial precisely because it raises broader questions, as Haynes' (1998:1) global study summarises well:

> "[Religious organisations] are increasingly concerned with political issues, challenging the legitimacy and autonomy of the primary secular spheres, the State, political organisation and the market economy. They are also refusing to restrict themselves to the pastoral care of individual souls, instead raising questions about, inter alia, the interconnections of private and public morality, and the claims of states and markets to be exempt from extrinsic normative considerations."

In doing this, as this literature review has demonstrated, religious organisations stand at the intersection of several key global debates, and as a result are eminently worthy of careful study in terms of the precise roles they adopt, and the dilemmas which result from them doing so.

Much more could be said about these wide-ranging changes, but having briefly outlined some of the most significant global factors, I will now consider these factors in the specific context of English Christian community work, before setting out in full the methodological approach which formed the basis for the thesis.

Chapter 3: The Changing Socio-Political Context for Christian Community Work in England

3.1 Introduction to the English Context

The English policy context reflects many of the global debates over the role of faith in public life, even though England is part of what Crouch (2000) describes as the relatively "quiet continent" of Europe. The particular manifestation of these themes in England is significantly shaped by the local socio-economic context, history, culture and politics, as this chapter will explore. In locating the specific development of English Christian community work within this national context, the foundation is laid for the critical analysis of the research data in later chapters. Whilst this chapter is presented in the form of a conventional literature review, the literature cited is a mixture of academic research and more practically-oriented 'grey literature' documents produced by various stakeholders who are positioned within the context outlined. Particular care has been taken with the latter, given its situated nature, to acknowledge the position of the authoring body. In addition, this critical analysis was supported by the findings from the initial national phase of the direct research, for which the methods are described in Chapter 4 and further detailed in Appendix A.

In fact, as the previous chapters have concluded, there can be no 'neutral' perspective on this work. Hence, the initial stages of the

research involved establishing an overview of the national context as seen from a broad range of different perspectives. This enabled an analysis of the different positions and agendas of the different individuals, groups and bodies involved. This analysis was crucial for considering the priorities and expectations which they bring to Christian community work in the English context. Hence, this chapter critically analyses these positions, agendas, priorities and expectations in context, considering their relationship with each other and the broader global issues already outlined. By doing this, potential differences between these agendas are highlighted which prove crucial to understanding the subsequent data on different views of 'good practice', organisational dynamics, and how these relate to each other.

3.2 The Changing Role of English Churches - Historical and Contemporary Church Agendas

Historical Christian Contributions to Social Welfare

Christians are widely recognised as having played a formative historical role in English social welfare provision and policy development. Whether working individually or collectively, by themselves or with those who have not shared their beliefs, Christians have made a substantial

contribution to social welfare activity. Furbey and Macey (2005:96) summarise this in arguing that:

> "The agency and latency of religious institutions has been significant in the history of British social and urban policy and provision. ... There are few areas of social welfare that do not bear the imprint of religious motivations, ideas and actions, from early 'reformers' and philanthropists to the subsequent, and ongoing, involvement of faith-based organisations and their individual members, both Christian and, latterly, non-Christian."

Many early charities and collective movements established to address poverty and work with young people have roots in historic forms of Christian social action, especially from the Victorian era.[3] Much of this work built on the substantial legacy of a comprehensive parish system in many of the major denominations (including the established Church of England), resulting in virtually all geographical areas being covered by at

---

[3] Details of this involvement in terms of particular characters and particular instances can be found in many historical academic studies, not least in Gilchrist, Jeffs and Spence's (2001; 2003) and Gilchrist and Jeffs' (2001) edited collections, and the multiple articles available in the Informal Education Encyclopaedia at www.infed.org. The Catholic Agency for Social Concern (2001) has also produced a useful additional report charting historic Catholic contributions to social welfare in England and Wales which adds to this evidence base.

least one church. In many cases, this has been multiplied by the Protestant Reformation legacy of several denominations in some areas, each attracting different groups.

A significant example of this involvement of Christian individuals and organisations in social welfare at a parish level would be the extensive involvement of churches in education, originally developed extensively via the Sunday School movement (Smith, 2000b). This has subsequently resulted in a substantial retained role in the education system to the present day (Francis, 1998), despite increasing state encroachment. Many of these movements pre-dated widespread state involvement in addressing social welfare issues, and established themselves independently of the churches (albeit often with continuing close relationships and support, but sometimes experiencing opposition).

Historical studies have begun to explore how the Christian protagonists involved in these movements and the resulting organisations held diverse perspectives on the place of faith in their work, combined with different understandings of how their work might relate to other organisations, churches and the state.[4] Whilst there is not sufficient space here to chart the effects of these understandings comprehensively, it is important to note that these diverse understandings informed a wide

---

[4] See footnote 3 for details of some of these historical studies.

range of different traditions and models of work which have remained influential to the present day. These models adopted various strategies to achieve their aims, adopting varying relationships with the state and incorporating a range of political perspectives, including colonial, philanthropic and more radical collective action approaches (Popple, 1995).

Priests and church workers were especially influential in the development of early community centres, including establishing the influential Settlement movement in response to poverty in some inner-city areas (Smith, 2002c). This collective movement was established when a vicar, Canon Samuel Barnett, became increasingly dissatisfied with the limited impact of the individually-focused Charity Organisation Society, of which he was also a founding member (Popple, 1995). This is just one example of the crucial role played by Christian activists in creating community work through developing forms of collective activities which became distinct from the individual-case-holding form of social work developed from the Charity Organisation Society model. Whilst community work, social work, youth work and the state continued to experience changing relationships throughout the subsequent decades, these relationships have continued to be informed by several different schools of thought which often create tensions in the expressed aims and purposes of the work (Banks, 2004), albeit increasingly in ways disconnected from church discourses (see below).

The complexity of the resulting contemporary situation for the churches, and its comparative relationship with other European contexts, is illustrated by Middlemass's (2006) comparative case study of a town in Northern England. Whilst Middlemass's study shows that there remains widespread support for church involvement in the delivery of social welfare activities in the local area, it also recognises that the rationales and approaches available for such involvement are increasingly contested and problematic in a number of regards. Studies such as this (and the previously mentioned report by The Catholic Agency for Social Concern, 2001) are increasingly providing evidence that churches face considerable challenges in continuing their historic role not just in social welfare policy and provision, but also in public life in general. In this way, the relationship between religion, politics, identity and social action in England is coming under similar pressures as the relationship between these issues in the broader global context outlined in Chapter 2. The particular reasons for this increased scrutiny and pressure in the specific English context will now be considered.

Church Decline and Secularisation?

As previously noted for Western societies in general, there has been much debate over whether English society is becoming increasingly secularised, in the sense of Wilson's definition of secularisation as "the process whereby religious thinking, practices and institutions lose social significance" (Wilson, 1966:xiv). Certainly, some recent studies into the

involvement of 'faith communities' in urban regeneration have drawn the conclusion that there is a "pervasive gap between religious values and practices and the central values of liberal, secular, Western society" (Farnell, Furbey et al, 2003:44).

What is clear is that, despite retaining a nominally-established church in the form of the Church of England, overall church attendance levels have fallen dramatically in recent years. The Religious Trends church survey data (Brierley, 2000) indicates that UK Sunday church service attendance fell by 32% between 1979 and 1998, from approximately 5.4 million in 1979 to 3.7 million in 1998. This equates to a fall from 10.9% of the population in 1979 to 7.4 % of the population in 1998 when rising population figures are taken into account. Other studies show continuous inter-generational decline, whether measured by affiliation, attendance or belief, since 1851 (Crockett and Voas, 2006). Despite this, official studies continue to show consistently that between 73% and 74% of the population claim a nominal affiliation with Christianity, with the next highest religious affiliation being Islam at 2% and Hinduism at 1% (O'Beirne, 2004).

Hence, whilst the importance of the decline in participation in traditional forms of religiosity should not be underestimated, many church explanations for this decline focus on the tendency for churches to express themselves in out-dated forms (in terms of language, structure, culture and forms of service). These forms are seen as

struggling to reconnect with changing social patterns and people who have had little or no previous church contact (e.g. Church of England's Public and Mission Affairs Council, 2004). This has reduced church contact with the wider community down to its historical involvement in presiding over significant life events, such as baptisms, marriages and funerals, and perhaps a traditional mother and toddler group.

Research with those who do not regularly attend church shows that many people engage in wide-ranging searches for spiritual fulfilment and meaning, but frequently do not connect this with the church's purpose and role (Spencer, 2005; Day, 2006). Others characterize the situation for most British people as 'believing without belonging', often for similar reasons (Davie, 1994).

At the same time, the Church of England in particular has been hampered by internal schisms over the appointment of women priests and issues of homosexuality (Gill, 1998; Commission on Urban Life and Faith, 2006). Arguably, these issues have been indicative of broader divisions between clergy on theological issues relating to Biblical interpretation and internal socio-political positions on change. Such problems have not helped the public image of the church, which has been further battered through frequent media scandals portraying priests as stereotypically hypocritical or even paedophiliac. Equally damaging, if less public, has been the gentrification of many churches, resulting in churches which struggle to relate to working class culture

(Hasler, 2006), a significant increase in the average age of congregation members and a reduction in creative applications of faith in ways which are relevant to people's everyday lives (Drane, 2000). This has been coupled with the burden of millions of valued 'heritage' buildings that absorb increasing proportions of congregational members' time and resources to maintain and repair (Church of England Church Heritage Forum, 2004). The economic impact of these changes has been exacerbated when combined with a shortfall in pension contributions to provide for the larger numbers of former clergy now in retirement. Together, these forces have exerted significant economic pressures on many churches and denominations (see, for example, Bladon, 1998, on the Church of England financial position).

Theologically, many churches have responded to these pressures by turning inwards and becoming isolated from wider societal debate. Such churches have become largely reliant on traditional, pre-packaged forms of worship (Drane, 2000) and the continued replication of dogmatic modernist assumptions and arguments in the face of wider social changes (Cray, 1998). This has left many Christians unable to communicate their faith in a meaningful way to people who hold another worldview, in a society where even the potential existence of a 'real truth' and 'grand narrative' has been superseded by a liberal relativism which denies the possibility of either (see Section 2.5 and Schaeffer, 1998). In this context, some more conservative theologians such as Schaeffer have

sought to explain church decline in terms of the churches' failure to retain traditional absolutes and expressions of faith. These theologians argue that the reason churches have become ineffective is because they have become infected by a broader social liberalism which ultimately undermines their worldview. In practice, for some churches, this approach is a form of traditionalist fundamentalism that can increasingly extend to incorporate even minor church traditions, making them into an inflexible straight-jacket which cannot reflect on why and how these traditions were originally established. As a result, many traditionalist churches retain the forms of service, prayer and language established in previous centuries, with little or no scope for change to adapt to the current context. Without such scope, churches can struggle to communicate their perspectives meaningfully to others, which can contribute to stagnation and a negative spiral of decline. Such traditions also tend to be the aspects of church life which differ most between denominations. As a result, Erskine (2003) critiques an over-emphasis on such traditions as divisive and problematic for developing ecumenical relationships between different denominations to enable them to work together on issues of shared concern in local areas. However, such traditions are also important parts of individual churches' identities, connecting them both with rich resources from past expressions of faith and with other churches holding similar traditions in the present day. This means that simply discarding them would also present significant

problems, not least because it could threaten their sense of identity in a rapidly changing and uncertain context.

Theological and Church Innovation: Rebuilding Community Connections?

Despite these challenges, some churches and theologians have sought to "re-think" their faith and approaches to "being church" in order to try to adapt to this changing context (Newbigin, 1989; White, 1997; Edwards, 2002; Bayes, 2004; Church of England Public and Mission Affairs Council, 2004). In this context, the nature of church engagement with the wider community and society takes on a new significance, as it strikes at the heart of their understanding of the Gospel and how they put their belief into practice as a group (Kuhrt, 2004a). Those churches which have sought to reconnect with the wider community and society have had the character of this re-engagement shaped significantly by a diverse range of historically-embedded theologies and practices, as this section will explore. Reflecting on their own experience and practice, some practitioners in infrastructure organisations have begun to recognise that different theological traditions and understandings can have a significant impact on community work practice (Ashdown, 2004), although the exact nature of this impact is little studied.

For some churches, this has led to an engagement with others based on a distinction between those who are 'outside' and those who are 'inside'

the church, with the main aim being to get those who are 'outside' to come in to the current form of church (Breen, 1993). This can either be through working with those currently 'inside' the church to bring along friends and contacts to existing provision, or activities designed to engage directly with those 'outside' the church by starting where the 'outsider' is at. Whilst the latter is typically seen to be more open to changing some aspects of the church's manifestation, both of these approaches are dominated by an evangelistic emphasis on drawing people into the existing church. Both approaches also share the view that social action should be a form of mission that explicitly aims to include evangelistic content.

Historically, evangelistic theologies such as these have been heavily critiqued by alternative 'social theologies' for their underpinning intention to 'make others like us', rather than responding to their needs. Social theologies, on the other hand, have sought to apply Gospel values into social action, but have often been critiqued by more evangelical perspectives for failing to explicitly preach the Gospel message in their work. These differences also extend to the level on which change is sought: evangelistic theologies have been critiqued for focusing almost exclusively on the need for personal change, and often ignoring the social dimensions of sin, whereas social theologies have been critiqued for ignoring the need for individual transformation through contact with the Gospel (Kuhrt, 2004b).

This historical debate had previously led to a polarisation between evangelical and 'social Gospel' approaches to church engagement with local communities, reinforcing the division between theologies concerned with spiritual change and those concerned with social change. Such divisions echo longstanding Western philosophical tendencies (dating back to Aristotle and Plato) to separate out the physical from the spiritual/sacred realm (Gaarder, 1997).

However, these divisions are inconsistent with the more holistic Biblical Hebraic worldviews (Oliver and Thwaites, 2001). Hence, this separation and polarisation is increasingly being recognised as a false dichotomy (Kuhrt, 2004a). Despite this, there remains significant debate over *how* social action might relate to mission and evangelism, not least over whether social action might in itself be a form of mission and/or a means for evangelistic contact.

In particular, where churches have retained an evangelical commitment to mission but become more open to critical reflection on how the Gospel is contextualised, there have been some interesting outcomes. Those churches which have begun to generate contextual theologies and alternative forms of church have also begun to offer significant critiques of the often-hidden ways in which social characteristics such as class come to embed their own prejudices and assumptions in traditional forms of belief, resulting in the exclusion of many other groups in society (Hasler, 2006). However, when single social groups (such as young

people) have gone on to form their own congregations, whilst this has often aided the coming together of this group in their own form of church, it has also created tensions in terms of how these congregations relate to the wider church (Cray, 2002). Other critiques resulting from this engagement have included radical challenges to dominant theological models. One example of this is the recent highly controversial call to abandon the penal substitution explanation of the meaning of the crucifixion, to enable better communication of the Gospel in the contemporary culture (Green and Baker, 2000; Chalke and Mann, 2003).

However, these debates and experimental forms of church have only been radical on the outside fringes of church life in England. In particular, there have been no signs of a widespread English local equivalent to Latin America's base ecclesial communities, challenging traditional worship services and sermons in favour of more participatory dialogical approaches (Smith, 1987). Perhaps the closest that English churches have moved towards this kind of reinvention has been widespread experimentation with house groups, house churches and (to a lesser degree) cell churches, and especially the ubiquitous 'Alpha'-

style course[5]. Increasingly, there has also been significant high-level interest in exploring different ways of 'being church', often termed 'fresh expressions of church' or the 'emerging church' (Lings, 2003). These have been defined by the official Fresh Expressions[6] website designed to promote sharing between these initiatives as follows:

"A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church." (Fresh Expressions and Church Army, 2007)

The challenges of this context have raised increasing theological questions about the relationship between missiology and ecclesiology (Selby and Smith, 1998; Mission Theological Advisory Group, 2002), whilst at the same time generating an increased interest in the potential of community work to bridge the increasing gap between churches and the wider community in a different way (Erskine, 2003; Ashdown, 2005).

---

[5] Alpha courses involve a short series of small group discussion meetings looking at Christian perspectives on the meaning of life; see http://uk.alpha.org/ for further information.

[6] The 'Fresh Expressions' organisation referred to here is a joint initiative of the Church of England, the Methodist Church and the Church Army; see http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/ for details and a directory of examples.

These challenges have been exacerbated by the dilemmas arising from interfaith encounter in a diversifying context (Mission Theological Advisory Group, 2002; Inter Faith Consultative Group, 2005), and the need to train leaders who can deal with practising in a multi-faith environment (Gilliat-Ray, 2003).

This movement has built on various earlier publicised case-study examples highlighting models and approaches where churches and individual Christians appeared to find renewal in community-related activity and social action (see, for example, Eastman, 1988; Evans and Fearon, 1998). In addition to these, local projects and churches have increasingly produced their own literature charting the stories of individual projects' own developments, reflecting on their value in a qualitative way; see, for example, Erskine and Hoey (2003) and The Shaftesbury Society (2003a; 2003b). However, Erskine (2003) has critiqued many of the resulting community projects for focusing solely on building one church's relationships with the community, rather than working together ecumenically to increase the potential impact of this work.

As churches have wrestled with these issues, some have reflected on the need for appropriately-trained staff to help deliver this work on the ground, with some denominations turning to existing orders, mission societies (such as the Church Army) or roles (such as Deacons). Others have begun to draw on relatively new professional roles such as youth

ministry, adapting skills and understandings from related disciplines such as professionally-accredited youth work training programmes. The historical professional link between youth work and community work in England has also meant that some mainstream universities have included the option to specialise in church-based community and youth work on shared programmes with secular practitioners (see chapter 7 for a more detailed exploration of training issues). One denomination (the United Reformed Church) has even begun to recognise community work as a vocation equal in official status to ordained ministry, albeit for a very small number of workers nationally (see United Reformed Church, 2005). However, there remain concerns about employment conditions for many workers in churches and related organisations, not least in terms of comparatively low pay and their employers' relatively low awareness of employment law (see, for example, Cann's 2002 study of these issues in Manchester).

In summary, church concerns in the current context have focused on rebuilding connections with communities that revitalise their ability to address social needs and relate their faith to everyday life. In the process, churches often seek to address their own organisational pressures brought about by declining congregational numbers and related economic factors. However, these changing church concerns have not developed in isolation. Their relationship with community work has also

been significantly influenced by the changing policy context, as we will

now consider.

3.3 The Policy Context – Changing Government Agendas and Church Responses

Welfare Reform and Service Delivery

Compared to the church concerns highlighted above, the forces shaping

changing Governmental relationships with churches have been influenced

by a very different set of policy agendas and concerns. As previously

highlighted for the broader Western context in Chapter 2, church-based

involvement in English welfare provision was the norm in several fields

prior to the growth of the welfare state, dating back to medieval times

(Midwinter, 1994). An increasing state concern with welfare, developed

initially through the 'poor law' system, took hold in earnest from the

Victorian era, although provision at this time remained dominated by

independent philanthropic models (Midwinter, 1994). However, it was

the development of the post-war social democratic consensus in 1945

that led to a rapid expansion of state involvement in welfare delivery,

often encouraged by the churches. The 'rediscovery of poverty' in the

1960s perhaps opened up a residual role for the churches in addressing

these needs, but it was not until the New Right reforms begun by

Margaret Thatcher from 1979 that state provision again began to recede

from many areas of welfare. These reforms were based on an

individualistic ideology and market-based reform of nationalised industries and service sectors which had previously been dominated by the public sector. As these reforms took effect, they led to an increasing awareness of structural inequality and extreme poverty for some marginalised areas and groups.

It was into this context in the mid-1980s that churches re-emerged as a significant political force through the publication of a series of reports that were highly critical of Government policies, which they saw as exacerbating inequality and poverty. The landmark report of this era was 'Faith in the City' (Church of England Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, 1985). These reports arguably marked the rediscovery of a church role not just in alleviating the effects of poverty, but also in having a prophetic voice to challenge its causes and call for social transformation (Selby and Smith, 1998). Following the publication of this report, the Church Urban Fund was established with the aim of "supporting local projects tackling poverty in England's poorest communities" (Church Urban Fund, 2007b) and "confronting the Church with a great challenge: not to retreat from the problems found in cities, to look to tackle the roots of poverty, and to aim to make a tangible difference in deprived communities." (Church Urban Fund, 2007a).

Up to this point, New Right policies had focused primarily on the private sector as a means of achieving urban renewal and development. However, over the course of the next dozen years, the Conservative

government increasingly looked to develop a mixed economy of welfare built on compulsory competitive tendering whilst at the same time seeking co-operation between public, private and, increasingly, voluntary sector agencies. A sizeable example of this tendency was the extent of voluntary organisations' involvement in the delivery of large area-based regeneration programmes such as the 'Single Regeneration Budget'. At a national level, this increasing search for co-operation resulted in the establishment of the Inner Cities Religious Council in 1992 as a forum for interaction between faith representatives and government on urban renewal and social exclusion issues (Farnell, Furbey et al, 2003).

The advent of the New Labour government in 1997 extended this involvement through an increased emphasis on notions of 'partnership' between ever wider groups that could be co-opted into the policy agenda, both in terms of governance and service delivery (Glendinning, Powell and Rummery, 2002). Increased public spending was accompanied by a raft of New Public Management reforms designed to impose centralised targets and quantitative performance management frameworks. These frameworks were designed to measure efficiency and effectiveness, in the interests of improving public services and their accountability (Audit Commission, 2000). By enabling agencies to work more closely together, partnerships were also seen as being crucial in dealing with the complexity of the contemporary welfare landscape and

tackling intransigent social issues such as poverty which cut across several organisational and professional remits (Audit Commission, 1998). For some aspects of policy, and in some local areas, these changes have also connected with drives to develop new forms of community involvement to shore up perceived democratic deficits (Banks and Orton, 2007). However, these approaches have been substantially critiqued, not least in terms of whether they close down the independence of vital parts of civil society (Mayo and Taylor, 2001; Craig and Taylor, 2002), especially by failing to recognise the alternative values and identities of smaller 'partners'. These approaches have also been critiqued in terms of whether they are capable of achieving the impacts which they claim (Pollitt, 2000). Nevertheless, the principles of partnership, community involvement and performance management through indicators and targets have increasingly become requirements of many state and other funders, and are often considered by these sources as self-evidently 'good practice'. The bureaucracy associated with performance management and the consequences of its implementation have however, clashed significantly with existing professional cultures, and have often been resisted in practice (Kitchener, Kirkpatrick and Whipp, 2000).

As this policy of diversifying welfare delivery whilst seeking wider forms of community involvement has been realised, albeit problematically, the government has sought additional possible 'partners' to involve. As a result, their attention quickly turned to the possibility of (re-)including

'faith communities' (Farnell, Furbey et al, 2003). The reasons why 'faith communities' were seen as such attractive potential 'partners' were their perceived potential to bring to bear a combination of their local presence, leadership, resources, networks and their proven commitment to action on the delivery of services, especially in deprived neighbourhoods (Finneron, Green et al, 2001; Local Government Association, 2002; Farnell, Furbey et al, 2003; Bacon, Groves et al, 2004). As these studies highlight, 'faith communities' were also seen as having existing relationships with groups who were otherwise 'hard to reach' for the government. Of course, this increased concern with including and involving 'faith communities' was also driven by wider concerns regarding cohesion and terrorism, as the next section will highlight.

As a result, statutory guidance has increasingly emphasised how both local authorities (Local Government Association, 2002) and national government (Home Office Faith Communities Unit, 2004) should work more closely with faith communities. This changed government approach to faith groups was fed and encouraged by increasingly-organised lobbying from proliferating Christian infrastructure organisations. In these ways, both government rhetoric and church infrastructure bodies have collaborated in demonstrating a range of benefits which involving 'faith communities' could bring to the policy-making and policy-delivering processes (Smith, 2004a).

However, implementing this changed central Government policy towards involving faith communities in service delivery was not unproblematic in practice. Even Government guidance (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2004:1) came to recognise that these policy changes were not always being translated into changed attitudes amongst many public agencies at a local level:

> "It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that the Government's recognition of the faith communities' significant neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion role has yet to be reflected fully in local practice. The broad picture is still patchy, with enthusiasm in some areas matched by apparent reluctance to involve faith communities in others."

In response, a plethora of regional and more local reports were commissioned by infrastructure bodies to highlight to decision-makers the socio-economic contribution made by churches in particular areas (see, for example, Churches Regional Commission for Yorkshire and the Humber, 2002, 2003; North West Development Agency, 2003; Jackson and Kimberlee, 2004; Lawrence, 2004; Smith, 2004b; with a summary of even more studies available from the Commission on Urban Life and Faith, 2005). Other reports have focused particularly on the contribution of churches in rural areas (Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, 1990; Farnell, Hopkinson et al, 2006), including latterly their particularly valuable contribution in responding to the 'Foot and Mouth'

outbreak which devastated rural communities in 2001 (Churches Regional Commission for Yorkshire and the Humber, 2003). These studies focused on providing localised evidence to persuade local agencies that they should engage with churches and/or 'faith communities' more widely, making connections with broader national government policy agendas. In the process, many of these studies drew together survey data and anecdotal case studies to try to demonstrate the extent of the socio-economic contribution made by faith groups to local statutory agencies.

However, the resulting evidence was not always unproblematic or uncontested. The findings presented have typically been based on either large-scale surveys (which presented significant methodological challenges) or anecdotal individual examples (from which it was difficult to generalise). The difficulties in the conclusions drawn from these studies can be illustrated by using one example, namely the data presented that church members are more likely to volunteer than non-church-members. Locke and Lukka's (2003) study highlights the complexity of understanding volunteering in this context, including the multiple factors influencing propensity to volunteer and the type of voluntary work in which people of different faiths engage. These complexities make large-scale quantitative study difficult. For example, the Churches' Regional Commission for Yorkshire and the Humber (2002:76) study found that:

"25% of church-goers engage in church social action and 25% in other social action. By comparison, volunteering among the general population would seem to be between 6 and 10%."

However, these figures clash with O'Beirne's (2004:47) survey for the Home Office, which found that rates for formal and informal volunteering were the same for Christians as those of no religious affiliation and the general population average (both 67% informal and 39% formal). Such discrepancies might be explained by the previously-noted difference between religious affiliation and other more active measures of religious participation or belief. Further difficulties then arise in terms of definitions, not least (for Christian community work) whether to include work undertaken by para-church bodies in addition to that linked to a particular church, whether to include work which includes an element of promoting religion, whether to include informal support just offered to other members of a volunteer's own congregation, etc.

Given these difficulties of large-scale surveys and generalisation, and the pressures on Christian community work projects to prove their worth to potential funders, other infrastructure bodies have increasingly focused on measuring and communicating the benefit of individual projects. This work has involved pragmatically enabling individual churches or projects to assess and prove their contribution in economic terms or other terms that statutory bodies or non-Christian-funders might understand. One of

the best examples of this has been the Church Urban Fund's community value toolkits, which provide a spreadsheet for calculating the economic contribution and other key statistical contributions made by a church to the local community (Church Urban Fund, 2006). Others have sought to make available toolkits drawing on wider management resources, community work resources and established voluntary sector resources for use with faith-based organisations, in order to assess and improve their work (e.g. Ahmed et al, 2004; Rossiter and Summers, 2004).

Despite these difficulties of communicating and 'proving' effectiveness, the contemporary relationship between churches and Government in terms of welfare delivery is a far cry from the antagonism which characterised this relationship in the mid-1980s. Unlike the earlier reports, very few contemporary reports have approached the current relationship with a structuralist critique of these developments (Neary, 2002). Indeed, only a few organisations have expressed concerns about being co-opted into a state agenda concerned with rolling-back of welfare services, despite Jupp (1997:3) recognising that:

> "This resurgence of religious engagement with the wider community has coincided with the withdrawal of the state from direct provision of many services."

Whilst there remain a number of issues which can cause friction in this relationship (as we will shortly explore), the limit of most contemporary

critiques is an occasional recognition that churches should balance their direct response to those in need with a prophetic challenge to those in power.

However, other studies have begun to critique these agendas from other perspectives. A common critique is based on increasing evidence that the cultures and practices of churches and other faith-related organisations do not always fit comfortably with those accepted in the statutory sector, nor necessarily with those in established voluntary sector contexts (Smith, 2000a; Farnell, Furbey et al, 2003).

Morisy (2004) is one of the most prominent of the writers on Christian community work who have developed this form of critique. Morisy critiques the churches' frequent acceptance of the bureaucracy and 'needs-meeting perspective' inherent in contemporary professionalised responses to perceived social problems. She highlights how the increasing formality of welfare provision in the contemporary context can lead to defensive bureaucracies which prioritise the concerns of the powerful. In doing this, Morisy argues that such approaches can prevent more authentic forms of Christian mission.

A further critique has been put forward by some Christian infrastructure organisations, which have produced hard-hitting research-backed reports lambasting the tendency of churches to work in isolation from other organisations and each other (Evangelical Alliance, 2004; The

Shaftesbury Society, 2004). Some of these reports have been backed by their own research (as in the case of the Evangelical Alliance study) or are supported by independent research (such as in Blake-Lobb's 2006 study of salaried church-based youth workers in Sheffield). Indeed, the precise relationship between faith-related organisations and the wider community and voluntary sector itself remains contested and problematic (Smith, 2002a).

In addition, those involved in Christian community work have also tended to encounter particular issues over understandings of equal opportunities and the widening of anti-discrimination legislation (Smith, 2000a; Farnell, Furbey et al, 2003).

All of these issues and critiques will receive much further attention drawing on the primary research data in later chapters. At this stage, it is sufficient to note that an increasing academic awareness of such issues has led to calls for a research agenda to explore them in greater depth (Farnell, 2001). It is also important to note that, despite the emerging critiques, Bretherton (2006:371) is a relatively lonely voice amongst the available literature in arguing that:

> "the church, in the light of what is actually being offered to it by the state in terms of partnership, should, on the basis of its own frame of reference, refuse the terms and conditions of cooperation".

Instead, the overall change in the relationship between government and churches outlined in this section is perhaps best reflected by the differences between the 'Faith in the City' report and the 'Faithful Cities' report (Commission on Urban Life and Faith, 2006) which was published to mark its 20th anniversary. In this latter report, the language now consciously strives to include other different faith groups and agencies, and the recommendations focus on issues such as retaining the continued church presence in urban areas and clarifying partnership relationships with Government. To do this, the report recommends the inclusion of urban and contextual theology in practitioner/leader training, more informal education provision for young people, faith groups promoting social cohesion, churches debating what makes for a good city and continuing to support the Church Urban Fund (Commission on Urban Life and Faith, 2006:89-92). Even the more strident recommendations, such as those which challenge the level of inequality in the country and its treatment of asylum seekers, focus on relatively pragmatic responses. For example, to address inequality, the report specifically calls only for the implementation of a "living wage", the adoption of wider criteria for measuring economic success, the greater involvement of people in solving local community problems and for churches to challenge "the thoughtless accumulation of wealth" (Commission on Urban Life and Faith, 2006:90). In addition, *Faithful Cities'* broader analysis also recognises as a major theme the rapid

increase in religious and cultural diversity. It is this aspect of the changing context which presents a different set of policy agendas and challenges, as I will now consider.

Community Cohesion, Discrimination, Involvement and Security – Alternative Agendas

This policy context has been complicated by policy development in the related fields of 'community cohesion', national security and foreign policy. These fields in turn have been affected by the related theoretical debates about the links between faith, community, ethnicity and identity.

Several large-scale studies have explored the complex relationships between ethnicity and religion in Britain, whether measured in terms of self-identification, stated belief, religious practices and/or cultural practices, as well as their respective relationships with deprivation (Modood, 1997a, 1997b; O'Beirne, 2004; Beckford, Gale et al, 2006; Purdam, Afkhami et al, 2007). In practice, policy discourses and guidelines to practitioners have often confused and conflated terms such as 'race', ethnicity and religion together. One particular reason for this has been that religion tends to be "the key area where the minority groups manifest a cultural dynamic which is at least partly at odds with native British trends" (Modood, 1997b:356).

Within such studies and the related policy discourses, the available evidence has supported continuing concern over the significant patterns of disadvantage for people from ethnic minorities and minority faiths. This concern has built on historical policy dilemmas within British government policy during the last century over immigration, national identity, 'race relations' and integration/multiculturalism (see Cantle, 2005, for a detailed historical summary). As Cantle notes, in response to such concerns, successive governments had introduced patchwork legislation in these policy areas, not least in terms of increasingly restricting support for asylum seekers and limiting immigration (including immigration from the former colonies). Domestically, the Race Relations Acts of 1968 and 1976 enshrined rights against direct and indirect discrimination, with the legal definitions of these forms of discrimination forming the basis for subsequent legislation on sex (1975), disability (1995), gender reassignment (1999), sexuality and religious grounds (2003), and perhaps to a lesser degree, age (2006)[7]. Increasingly, this legislation also imposed a duty on public authorities to promote equality

---

[7] The full names of the main relevant acts are, in order, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 (supplemented by the Equal Pay Act 1970); the Disability Discrimination Act 1995; Sex Discrimination (Gender Reassignment) Regulations 1999; Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation/Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003; and the Equality Act 2006.

on these grounds in their activities[8]. However, this duty did not extend to include the full extent of positive discrimination measures enacted in other countries such as the USA (apart from in extremely limited circumstances and ways). Despite this, a particular form of political correctness took hold amongst public officials which regulated particular expressions of language and behaviour in often rapidly-changing ways. These responses have not prevented high profile investigations into matters such as the inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence (Macpherson, 1999) finding that prejudice remained endemic in public institutions. This investigation also influentially concluded that such prejudice could have institutional and cultural manifestations, as well as the traditionally-recognised individual ones.

Concern over discrimination and disadvantage has thus led to related policy concerns about the 'social exclusion' of particular ethnic groups, including their relative exclusion from decision-making structures. This concern has latterly been extended to faith groups, with one infrastructure agency research report finding that faith groups received a patchy and often confused reception when trying to get involved in key

---

[8] For example, the Race Relations Acts were amended in 2000 to include such a positive duty on public bodies to promote race equality.

decision-making structures such as Local Strategic Partnerships (Escott and Logan, 2006).

These concerns have been exacerbated by reports into several civil disturbances across Northern towns and cities in early 2001 (Cantle, 2001; Clarke, 2001; Denham, 2001; Ritchie, 2001) and related reports (Ouseley, 2001), which suggested that the causes lay in residents living segregated and polarised "parallel lives" (Cantle, 2001). This led to the adoption of a national policy agenda concerned with developing "community cohesion". This emphasised the need to address the increasing diversity within local areas by building connections between different individuals and communities in terms of values, spaces and relationships (Cantle, 2005). Subsequent research has shown that cohesive communities have other benefits, such as contributing towards lower crime levels overall (Wedlock, 2006).

As the causes of the perceived lack of 'community cohesion' have been analysed, the resulting debates have increasingly called into question the specific, yet implicit, model of multiculturalism underpinning the assumptions behind much of this debate. One example of this was the media-inflamed response to the Parekh (2000) report. This report had promoted a particular view of multiculturalism, and as a result was accused of trying to "fundamentally destabilise Britain" because it called some of these key issues of identity and their appropriate policy responses into question (Runnymede Trust, 2004:2).

Arguably, these problems reflected a conceptual problem with British public policy responses to diversity which had been identified much earlier by Modood (1997b:357-358). Modood's analysis recognises two different conceptions of equality, both of which have historically been incorporated in elements of British public policy, and both of which are based on the acceptance of difference in the private sphere. However, these conceptions of equality differ over whether people's difference should be recognised and supported or assimilated in the public sphere. In practice, these issues were frequently left to be dealt with in a contingent and pragmatic compromise on the ground (as the analysis in Chapters 6 and 7 will explore further). Any attempt to highlight the theoretical deficiencies of the underlying model, however, frequently met intense public resistance in the same way as the Parekh report.

As highlighted in Chapter 1, the landmark events of the terrorist attacks in the USA on 11th September 2001 by protagonists claiming Islamic identities and 'justifications' challenged this situation by making the role of faith in Western societies a high-profile and pressing concern (Sacks, 2002). This has only been exacerbated by subsequent bombings in London, as well as continued attempted attacks in a range of locations (including Glasgow airport in 2007). Governmental responses to these issues have tried to combine, often with great difficulties, attempts to engage with 'mainstream' Muslim groups with increasingly draconian legislation designed to aid the authorities in 'preventing extremism'

(see, for example, Brown, 2007). This has been complemented with the Government's highly controversial political support for an international 'war on terror' alongside the USA, encompassing invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The purported justifications for these governmental actions have often attempted to draw on moralistic and even religious language, but they have also received widespread criticism from a range of sources (e.g. Pilger, 2006), including faith-based critiques (Gunnell, 2004).

Arguably, the response to these events has exacerbated previous community cohesion concerns, whilst also making faith a central factor in these concerns. 'Islamic' terrorists have thus become the latest 'folk devil' (cf. Cohen, 1987), irrespective of consistent assertions by Muslim leaders explaining that terrorism contradicts basic tenets of the Islamic faith. Media-provoked debates about whether terrorist protagonists are also immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers have made direct connections with previous policy concerns. This environment has firmly brought faith into the limelight as a critical factor in debates over whether, or how far, government should be able to regulate belief, group membership, freedom of thought and public expression.

Most recently, the report of a Government-appointed 'Commission on Integration and Cohesion' (2007) has begun to acknowledge the impact of many of these issues and the limitations of previous approaches. In response, the Commission (2007:7) emphasises the need for communities to have a "sense of shared futures... - an emphasis on articulating what

binds communities together rather than what differences divide them";
"a new model of rights and responsibilities" based on citizenship and the
"obligations that go along with membership of a community"; "a new
emphasis on mutual respect and civility"; and a "commitment to
equality that sits alongside the need to deliver visible social justice".
Despite restrictions within its Government-defined terms of reference
focusing it on domestic rather than international policy, the report
highlighted the effects of foreign policy on domestic community
relations. It also highlighted several policy areas which were felt by
contributors to be the critical issues where these debates had particular
impact, including faith schools and single group funding. To these, one
might also add recent press discussions of a test case on whether a
Muslim woman could be legally sacked for refusing to remove her veil
when working at a church school (see Wainwright, 2006), as well as the
furore over whether church adoption agencies might receive an
exemption from discrimination laws (see, for example, Bunting, 2007).
On some of these issues, it seems that the different Government agendas
for working with faith groups contend with each other. In particular, the
desire to involve faith groups as service deliverers (especially to reach
particularly marginalised groups with a targeted service) and in decision-
making (to address some faith groups' own social exclusion) clashes with
concerns that this involvement might undermine cohesion, and/or result

in state-sanctioned privileging of particular religious perspectives, even discriminatory ones.

The challenge for Government policy in this context has thus been to try to combine these diverse agendas of religious groups' involvement in service delivery, involvement in decision making, and the building of a new shared consensus for national identity and local relationships/belonging in ways that don't create or encourage more divisive identity politics. An illustration of this at the national level has been the way that the Government has recently sought to bring together its work on faith, regeneration and cohesion under the same department. These policy changes were illustrated by the replacement of the Inner Cities Religious Council and a cohesion-focused 'Working Together' Steering Group with a new Faith Communities Consultative Council in 2006. The aim of this Faith Communities Consultative Council is "Giving faith communities a strong role and clear voice in improving cohesion, regeneration and renewal in local communities" (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007).

In attempting this blending of agendas, the concept of 'social capital' has increasingly been central to the academic and political attempts to explore how these agendas might fit together. Whilst there have been several approaches have been taken to defining this concept (e.g. Bordieu, 1983; Coleman, 1994; The World Bank, 1999; see Smith, 2007), one of the most influential has been Putnam's definition:

"social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000:19)

Several academic studies have begun to analyse the different models and issues involved in relating this concept to faith (Smith, 2002b, 2004a; Lowndes and Chapman, 2005; Farnell, Hopkinson et al, 2006; Furbey, Dinham et al, 2006). Such studies have tended to be particularly concerned with whether faith group involvement makes a 'connecting/bridging' contribution or 'dividing' contribution to social capital (i.e. whether faith communities foster greater social capital within one or more closely-tied groups, and whether/how this affects networks and relationships with those outside the group concerned). These and related studies have explored the connection with social capital in a critical way, utilising the concept to some degree whilst also sometimes questioning whether churches can flourish in the current form of civil society (Baker, 2005). Recently, the William Temple Foundation has pioneered efforts to explore whether there might also be a form of 'religious capital', and if so, what its relationship with social capital might be (Baker and Skinner, 2005b, 2006).

3.4 An Interim Conclusion – Policy Agendas and Pragmatism Under Strain

These issues, and the different national and local responses to them, will be explored in more detail through the research outlined in the following chapters. At this stage, it will suffice to note that the agendas driving the renewed interest in state/church co-operation are significantly different for each of the different parties involved. Government agendas of welfare reform, community cohesion and civil renewal contrast with pressing church concerns about declining attendance, theological and economic imperatives, and social relevance in a changing context. In addition, individual activists are concerned with living out their beliefs and values, often facilitated (or hindered) to some degree by existing religious institutions. When these activists become involved in activities broadly known as 'community work', different historical conceptions of the nature of community work, and the impact which faith might have on this work add to the diverse expectations influencing this work. This is further complicated by local and national research which increasingly highlights contentious issues arising from the engagement of 'faith communities' in the public sphere, as well as being increasingly critical of the terminology (especially that of 'faith communities') which is being used to implement these agendas (Smith, 2004a).

In contrast with the diversity of these expectations and agendas, however, there is substantial evidence that many 'faith communities' and public bodies are nevertheless engaged in ways of working together locally on issues of shared social concern. Within such arenas, and the publications arising from them, any critical awareness of the differing agendas of those involved is often limited and muted. Instead, these arenas and publications are characterised by an overwhelming pragmatism which endeavours to blend the different agendas of the different 'stakeholders' together through compromise and attempts to find common language and shared aims.

Modood (1997b:358) summarises this typical British pragmatism in terms of the way that the different perspectives on identity and equality have been handled by recognising that the burden of resolving these agendas has typically been on local practitioners and organisations:

> "There is indeed a genuine tension here, and perhaps it can only be resolved in practice, through finding and cultivating points of common ground between dominant and subordinate cultures, as well as new syntheses and hybridities. The important thing is that the burden of change (or the costs of not changing) are not all on one party."

This quote begins to summarise the potential importance of the character of the resulting spaces and practices on the identities and

cultures of all those involved. Local organisations involved in practice of this nature, connected to these agendas, thus become sites for a complex interplay between these areas of policy, civil society, individual/collective identity and action. When set in the broader international context, given the underlying contestation of the terms of the debate, it also highlights the political, hegemonic importance of such spaces as part of civil society caught up in the tussle between the state and those that identify themselves with a religion.

This research aimed to critically explore the effects of these diverse expectations on practice. The potential and problems inherent in the synthesised, hybridised approaches arising from attempts to resolve these tensions *just* through practice (rather than also developing the associated theory) are assessed through the research in a more thorough way through the research findings discussed in the following chapters. However, to explore such a complex interplay between policy, organisations, individual practitioners and local areas through research set multiple methodological challenges. Before exploring the effects of this interplay on the organisations and individuals involved, a more detailed discussion of the methodology and methods adopted in researching this field is required, and it is to this methodological discussion that I will now turn.

Chapter 4: Community Work and Good Practice in England - Methodological Approach

4.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the methodological approach taken to investigate the chosen focus of this research, Christian community work in England, as one potential site where the broader issues and tensions highlighted in earlier chapters may be manifested. As described in Chapter 1, the research began with a particular focus on how practitioners and organisations handled difference within this work. Three specific dimensions to this difference were identified in Section 1.2: (i) Difference as diversity of practice; (ii) Difference as contestation of practice; and (iii) Difference as 'the other'. An important initial part of the research process involved developing this broad and multi-faceted area of interest into a focal question which might form the basis for the study. In Section 4.2, I outline the broad methodological approach used to approach this area of interest, before using section 4.3 to explain the process by which 'good practice' became the central concept employed to explore issues of difference with research participants. After explaining my rationale for choosing this focus, I go on to outline the multi-stage case study approach and methods adopted, and explain the way that key methodological issues such as reflexivity and data analysis

have been handled (Sections 4.4 – 4.6). I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the approach taken to analysing the data gathered and presenting the findings (Sections 4.7 – 4.8). Detailed information and tables to support the broad approach outlined here can be found in Appendices A to G, with links to this supporting information made throughout the chapter in appropriate places.

4.2 The Broad Methodological Approach

The previous literature review highlighted significant ontological and epistemological aspects to the research, as the central issues concern the nature of individuals' worldviews and their interaction with the socio-political world. These aspects presented considerable methodological challenges for constructing an appropriate research approach to Christian community work in the English context. As highlighted from the outset in Chapter 1, the nature of the topic under investigation is fundamentally concerned with individual and collective understandings of meaning, and their relationship to social action. Given this consideration, the study began with the intention of using a broad-based qualitative methodology as the most appropriate way to critically explore these meanings and actions (see Bryman, 1988). This also meant that the research itself has to deal methodologically with the issues of approaches to difference, especially in terms of values,

worldview and identity, since in this respect there can be no 'neutral' observer (May, 2001).

At the research proposal stage, this study initially began with a broad title, defining the area for exploration as "Faith, Dialogue and Difference in Community Regeneration Practice", rather than a pre-existing carefully defined question or hypothesis. This indicated the nature of the study, which was intended as an explorative study within a critical realist ontological and epistemological framework. This philosophical underpinning positioned the research approach between:

(i)   what Swinton (2001:97) describes as a "naïve realism that accepts that truth can be fully accessed through human endeavour, that is, that theoretical concepts find direct correlates within the world"; *and*

(ii)   constructivists, who might argue that reality is inaccessible (or even non-existent) and constructivism is *all* there is (Denzin, 1997; Swinton and Mowat, 2006).

As a result, the research process was broadly conceived as a critical journey to explore different perspectives on the general set of themes within the title. These themes were intuitively perceived by the researcher to have a problematic underlying relationship, the nature of which was (at the time) unclear, and which had (until recently) received relatively little research attention.

By critically considering the diverse perspectives of those with different connections to the topic, and the relationship between these different perspectives, the hope was that the research process would shed light on the nature of two things. Firstly, this process was intended to illuminate the situated nature of each of these perspectives themselves, when considered in relation to each other. Secondly, by generating critical reflection between perspectives through the research process itself, the aim was to improve combined understanding of the nature of practice. In this way, a crucial part of the topic itself (being focused on difference, and how this might relate to practice) was integrally related to the methodology adopted to investigate it.

Developing a methodological rationale which could accommodate this was one of the most difficult parts of the research, especially given the need to relate to the eclectic multi-disciplinary nature of the earlier work outlined in preceding chapters. To address this, the approach adopted broadly followed the methodological rationale developed by Swinton and Mowat (2006) which they describe as a form of 'practical theology'. In the dialogical process which arises out of this method, the improved understanding is geared towards improving practice, and in this sense, might be understood fundamentally as a form of action research. However, there are many theoretical approaches to action research (see McNiff and Whitehead, 2002), so it was important to circumscribe at the outset the ways in which this action-orientation was

intended. Unlike many action research projects, the research was not intended to produce an immediate practical outcome, nor engage with one narrowly-defined, pre-existing, coherent group to achieve change. Instead, the practical theology approach seeks to use the research process "not simply as a way of gaining new knowledge, but also as a way of enabling new and transformative modes of action" by contributing to critical reflection on practice (Swinton and Mowat, 2006:255). Whilst this approach is labelled as a form of theology, the practice-focused reflective research process on which it is based can draw on a broad range of social sciences to inform the resulting analysis (see, for example, Cameron et al, 2005[9]). This makes this approach well suited to this research topic with its broad range of previous multidisciplinary work. In stating this, it is important to note that whilst this study does aim to draw on other academic disciplines at appropriate points, the primary disciplinary perspective informing this research has been one of applied social sciences rather than theology or any other discipline. The implications of adopting this methodological approach on the research methods employed, and the place of reflexivity within this process, are considered further below.

---

[9] Cameron et al's (2005) edited collection specifically draws from four disciplines (Anthropology, Sociology, Organisational Studies and Theology) to approach the study of local churches.

4.3 Developing a Focal Question

Central to a methodological approach of this nature was the need to develop a focus for the reflective research process outlined. Accordingly, there was a need to develop the initial broad title into a central research question which could focus the resulting research design. In keeping with the exploratory nature of the research, both the title and the research design itself were refined through an iterative process, adapted based on emerging findings which were subsequently tested further. Nowhere was this more important than in establishing a gradually-refined question for the thesis overall which operationalised the key themes in a way that was accessible for research participants.

The key question which was developed at the start of the research as the central focus for enquiry was:

> "What is considered 'good practice' for Christian faith-based community work in the regeneration of local areas?"

The key terms in this question are analysed in more depth at other points in the thesis. However, at this stage it is necessary to make a few preliminary comments about the methodological choices which led to this particular construction of terms being used in initially framing the study.

Because of the contested nature of the topic, and the concern with studying difference, the study was deliberately framed exploratively using terms which opened up the greatest potential for problematisation from multiple viewpoints, whilst avoiding terms with connotations which excessively favoured one likely potential perspective. At the same time, the desire was to frame the question in terms which were in common usage and accessible to all of those likely to be involved, whilst providing a focus for the study which included both action and motivational meaning. Schutz (1962:59) describes this starting position as follows:

> "The observational field of the social scientist – social reality – has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings living, acting and thinking within it. By a series of common-sense constructs they have pre-selected and pre-interpreted this world which they experience as the reality of their daily lives. It is these thought objects of theirs which determine their behaviour by motivating it."

The term 'good practice' could be seen as one of these 'common sense constructs' which, when examined critically, provided a means to open up exploration of the motivations and meanings which people ascribed to their work.

This was then combined with another common sense construct, the concept of 'community', for critical exploration. As outlined earlier in Section 1.2, the essentially contested nature of the concept of 'community' which is at the heart of the practice being studied means that diverse socio-political, moral and even potentially theological perspectives contribute to its usage in particular contexts. As Banks (2004) outlines, this places ethical debates about 'the good' at the centre of a broad range of professions and practices involved in social welfare and related work; in this case, not least in terms of what makes for a 'good community' and how this might be achieved.

Similarly, the focus on 'practice' was intended to be wide enough to encompass both:

(i)   an individual practitioner's community work (and its relationship with any personal values/faith/beliefs); *and*

(ii)   any attendant organisational/social dynamics which necessarily involve more than one person.

Indeed, the notion of practice occurs directly at the intersection of the personal (e.g. individual beliefs, values, understandings, worldviews, etc.) and the organisational (e.g. ethos, creed, policy, custom, structure, culture) at the point at which they are enacted in the social and political world (see Wenger, 1998). It is at this point of manifestation that these actions and rationales become subject to

different interpretations and value judgements as to what is 'good' in deciding how to act, and why. This meant that the scope of the research necessarily left open the possibility of exploring any relationship between the notion of 'good practice' and 'the good practitioner'. By doing this, the socio-political and organisational dimensions of the study remained within the frame, whilst facilitating study of individual identities within these dimensions alongside individual choices between competing discourses of 'good practice' in making decisions about their practice.

By specifically focusing on 'good practice', the research also became embodied in a term which was in common usage across the wide range of people who were involved in the field of study, despite their potential differences over what 'good practice' might be, or how it might be determined. Thus, whilst the question includes the term 'good practice', the question was also deliberately phrased to problematise it, as this term was perceived to be the contested site of many of the debates where the global issues outlined are worked out in this particular context. In doing this, the question should not be interpreted as necessarily seeking a simple 'solution' to produce a single definition of 'good practice'. Rather, in seeking to explore different answers given from different perspectives to this question, and exploring the relationship/tensions between these, the research critically sought to analyse the concept itself. In doing so, the research drew on the

theoretical notions of 'problematisation' and 'generative themes', as outlined by Freire (1972), and sought to use the accompanying dialogical methods to critically unpack and explore them as part of a process of increasing reflection and awareness which Freire terms 'conscientisation'.

As described in Chapter 1, the focus on 'community work' in the central research question grounds the research in an established, if highly contested, field of work, with a rich tradition of a wide range of forms of social organising and action, encompassing both voluntary and paid-professional work (Popple, 1995). This tradition includes a complex relationship between individual and collective concerns or needs, and a range of different responses to them, but is broad enough to encompass collective as well as individual responses. Indeed, the term 'community' in itself is subject to highly varied uses, often politically or ideologically driven (Popple, 1995:2-4; Banks, 2003a), and hence an analysis of its use in this context offers particular problematising potential in terms of the motivations and relationships between participants in this context (Smith, 2004a). In a similar way to the decision to use the term 'good practice', the term 'community work' was chosen because it was in reasonably-widespread, yet diverse usage. As a result, it was seen as a potentially useful term in communicating the research topic in a way which aided problematisation by participants. In addition, the use of the term 'community work' rather than any more theologically-determined

vocabulary (e.g. 'mission') deliberately left open any questions concerning if/how this work might be related to broader theological and/or ecclesiological debates. Many other potential terms considered (including 'social action' and 'social work') carried with them different connotations in the contemporary English context, so these were avoided, whereas even those with little education about professional discourses or historical developments might understand 'community work' simply as 'work in the community'.

By further narrowing the focus onto the role of community work 'in the regeneration of local areas', the original question intended to deliberately ground the study in the context of particular geographical spaces, taking seriously the potential impact of local contexts and poverty. 'Regeneration' was initially chosen as a central concept because it was both:

(i)   a significant policy field which pulls a range of policies together at the point of interface with particular local areas and groups of people; *and*

(ii)   fundamentally concerned, at least in rhetoric, with taking action to improve their situation.

However, the nature of this improvement is frequently itself highly contested, and dependent on the values being used to assess matters such as which areas need 'regenerating' in the first place, which people

are considered central to this process, and which aspects of this area or group of people need to change; see, for example, Robinson's (2002) article on different visions for regeneration in the North East of England. In turn, these would impact on the ways in which regeneration might be attempted. In addition, there are different contested definitions of regeneration which could include any or all of physical, social, economic, personal and spiritual dimensions (see, for example, Department of Environment, 1995; London Assembly's Economic Development Committee, 2002; Knights, 2006).

However, it rapidly became apparent during early stages of the research process that respondents rarely identified with the term 'regeneration'. In addition, it was apparent from these early stages that a much wider, more complex set of policy drivers was impacting on understandings of 'good practice' (as outlined in Chapter 3). Hence, this aspect of the original question came to be of much reduced significance in the thesis overall. In addition, a potential flaw in the original question was identified in that it started by determining the purpose of Christian community work as being only about that which contributed towards regeneration. In the early stages of the research, it quickly became apparent that respondents saw the purpose and nature of their practice in much more diverse terms. Rather than allowing my initial question to constrain these findings, the decision was made to explore these alternative terms, thus being open to exploring respondents' alternative

understandings of their practice in their own terms, in keeping with the explorative intent of the study. (The study was grounded in particular local contexts and practices by using alternative methods, using the structure and design of the research process itself, as described shortly).

By following this course, the research was able to complement other current studies whilst making its own distinct contribution to knowledge by focusing on different understandings of 'good practice', rather than being primarily interested in relating the activities of faith groups to a particular current social policy concept or trend (such as 'civil renewal', 'regeneration' or 'social capital'), nor solely concerned with the extent of such groups' involvement in civil society, nor just the benefits/issues with involving and resourcing such groups. In addition, by locating the research clearly within an established professional field such as community work, both the research methodology and the topic under investigation could be grounded in well-developed professional understandings of the impacts of values on professional practice. In particular, this enabled the study to be informed by previous research work exploring how practitioners in contested social professions such as community work manage and resolve ethical dilemmas and value-conflicts (Banks, 2003b, 2004).

Supplementary Questions

The main focal question was supplemented by a number of additional initial questions which were designed to expand on the issues concerned and to guide the study. These supplementary questions were:

- What are the different understandings of 'good practice' in this work and context?

- To what extent are these understandings compatible or mutually exclusive? What are the points of compatibility and difference, and why have these developed in this way? Can apparently different understandings be reconciled in any ways, and if so, what is required for this to happen?

- How do practitioners and organisations communicate their understanding of 'good practice' to others?

- What effects do practitioners' or organisations' differing understandings of 'good practice' have on their ability to communicate and work in partnerships with other people (including service users), local groups and agencies?

- How are practitioner values, beliefs and identity interconnected in relation to their effect on practice?

- What impact do an organisation's dynamics (including ethos, culture, structures, support mechanisms, etc.) have on an individual practitioner's practice, and vice versa?

- How do practitioners and organisations incorporate and manage these effects in dealing with ethical dilemmas, when different values, beliefs and principles clash in relation to particular issues, situations or incidents?

These questions were intended to be indicative rather than definitive or comprehensive, as they were designed to focus attention on the implications of differing understandings of 'good practice', and how these are negotiated and managed in individual, organisational, inter-organisational and local community contexts. These questions provided semi-structured lines of enquiry that were adapted for use in particular stages of the research process depending on the context; see, for example, Appendix B and Appendix E. Having determined the central and subsidiary questions, the next methodological challenge was to devise an appropriate framework of research sites and methods through which these questions could be explored, as we will now consider.

4.4 The Overall Framework for Selecting Research Sites and Methods

One of the most difficult challenges was selecting a combination of methods which facilitated an investigation that could generate findings with potential applicability across the English context. To accommodate this within the qualitative framework, rather than adopting a statistical sampling approach, the research was designed to incorporate opportunities for theoretical generalization. Swinton and Mowat (2006:48) cite Sim (1998) to describe theoretical generalization in the sense that I am using it, which is:

> "us[ing] a concrete and delimited situation to better understand the broader social processes which structure it, and how they are mediated by the specifics of the situation."

A multi-stage approach was designed to allow for research into several such situations, enabling a certain degree of comparison to aid reflection, increase robustness and inform the generation of a tentative theoretical analysis. This analysis could then be made more widely available to explore whether the resulting interpretative narrative held resonance for those involved and contributed towards their ability to understand their work, thus testing the robustness and validity of the data-grounded interpretation more widely.

The overall framework for selecting research sites that emerged from this iterative and explorative methodological approach can be summarised in terms of three stages (or clusters) of research activity, as illustrated in Table 1.

This structure follows an approach that moved from the broad national context to more local contexts, with distinct sites identified at each stage for investigation. By following the research process in this order, the broader context could first be analysed whilst gaining access to a wide range of potential contacts for later stages, as well as data to assist in identifying criteria for later case study selection. This process involved purposive sampling at each stage to decide on the research activities which would add the most diversity and depth to the range of perspectives and experiences researched so far. In addition to the criteria indicated above, particular care was taken to include different perspectives at each stage in terms of their theological tradition and their attitude towards others who held different views.

Stage	Main Geograph-ical Area	Main Concern	Potential Key Sites Identified	Summary of Research Conducted
1	National and Regional	Establishing the policy context, identifying key messages being promoted by bodies at this level about faith-related community work, including their views of 'good practice'.	Government policy Infrastructure bodies covering a broad geographic area Relevant conferences & grey literature (guidance, reports, case studies, national occupational standards, etc.) produced by the above bodies.	16 formal semi-structured interviews with key figures identified as being active at this level. Attendance at a cross-section of 12 relevant conferences + additional supporting data and available publications relating to this level. (Full details provided in Appendix A; Interview themes/questions provided in Appendix B.)
2	Sub-Regional	Exploring how 'good practice' messages are communicated, mediated, understood, negotiated & contested between local organisations/practition-ers and broader bodies.	The every-day practice of infrastructure bodies engaged in giving advice and support to local organisations and practitioners.	Participant observation of interactions conducted by one infrastructure body, the Active Faith Communities Programme in West Yorkshire, consisting of 24 days over a period of 6 months, together with an analysis of associated evidence. (Full details, including itemised summary of interactions, evidence and themes, in Appendix C.)
3	Local	Exploring in more detail how individual practitioners / an individual project responds to these broader trends, with the aim of amplifying or disproving previous findings.	Training encounters (including professional university programmes & alternative infrastructure training consultation opportunities)	13 interviews + a focus group with 23 attendees + 9 brief telephone contacts + 5 student interviews regarding professional programmes at Durham University + attendance at 2 focus groups about the wider training needs of practitioners working in faith-related contexts across the North East. (Full list in Appendix D)
			A local project which seems, prima facie, to contradict many of the key findings established up to this point.	3 context-setting interviews + informal interviewing and participant observation for 10 days over a main period of 5 months + analysis of supporting documents. (Full list provided in Appendix D)

At each stage, an appropriate selection of research methods were determined, based on the particular concerns and different sites involved in that stage. The range of methods used included individual interviews, group interviews/focus groups, analysis of grey literature, and quasi-ethnographic participant observation & interaction. The specific methods used in each place were selected according to those most likely to be appropriate to that particular site and are detailed in Section 4.5. In determining appropriateness, the preference was for methods which would discretely capture practitioners as close to their practice as possible, using observational/interaction data where possible to cross-reference with interview answers to enable questions to be more reflective and probing, being particularly wary of the potential for both practice and interviews to be a form of performance to an audience. This proved to be a useful intuitive move, given the later findings relating to the tendency for individuals and organisations to develop different discourses for different audiences, or as one respondent put it 'telling them what they want to hear'. By including questions about (for example) how particular observed practice decisions related to their espoused rationales and supporting evidence such as organisational mission statements, it was often possible to gain further insight into practitioner decision-making, and often turn up areas where the practitioners had to rethink how they explained their own work in a more integrated way. In doing this, drawing on May (2001), it was

possible to generate additional data to analyse how practitioners' "vocabularies of motive" (Mills, 1940) are employed as part of their situated self-presentation (Harré, 1988) and socially-negotiated identity (Scott and Lyman, 1968).

The design was made more robust by introducing a structure which incorporated multiple case studies within one religion, using replicability rather than sampling logic, drawing on Yin's (1994) case study methodological rationale. This approach enabled purposive sampling of a selection of research sites, using criteria based on which cases would generate most data on the research question from a wide range of different traditions and positions.

The robustness of the design and likely wider theoretical validity of the findings was further improved by maximising the variation between stages and sites, taking into account a number of potentially relevant characteristics determined and refined by the iteratively-evolving findings. Given the focus of the research on difference, the research design needed to ensure that the research sites selected provided sufficient diversity, taking their particular context seriously.

This design had the additional advantage of enabling multiple layers to be embedded within it, including national, organisational and individual levels, an aspect of diversity which was anticipated from the outset.

Each layer was also then able to include particular research activity focused on situations where dialogue and learning between diverse perspectives was intended to take place. This allowed perspectives not just to be explored in isolation, but the dynamics of their interaction (including the potential interplay between levels) to also be studied.

These multiple stages included embedded case studies (e.g. the detailed work with a particular infrastructure body in stage 2, and with a particular local project in stage 3), which themselves offered opportunities for triangulating, challenging and/or refining emerging findings. In doing this, the research rationale drew on Stake's (2000) and Yin's (1994) rationales for using multiple comparative case studies. This approach allowed sensitivity to the multiple dimensions of a particular situation. Stake (2000:439-440) describes the dimensions of a case in the following way:

> "With its own unique history, the case is a complex entity operating within a number of contexts – physical, economic, ethical, aesthetic, and so on"

As such, a case study is a choice of "what is to be studied" (Stake, p.435); i.e. a site, rather than a specific method. However, each site must have a certain boundedness about it, meaning that the larger stages of the chosen research strategy do not really count as cases, whereas the specific organisational sites (e.g. the infrastructure

organisation studied in Stage 2) within each stage might be. Within such broader cases, there were additional layers of specific cases, such as the client organisations of the infrastructure body studied in Stage 2, and individual student experiences of the university's professional undergraduate programme within Stage 3. Stake (2000:435) suggests that organisations and individuals may fit this description of a case, whilst 'practice' might not. Given the focus of the research on practice, but with the clear steer from the literature review that context is extremely important in shaping the resulting interaction, these considerations were handled through different methods at each stage, as described in Section 4.5 below.

Thus, the primary logic behind the selection of those case studies which were used was a combination of what appeared to be intrinsically interesting about particular potential cases and what they appeared, prima facie, to offer in terms of opportunities for new learning which further problematised findings so far. In this way, the approach played to the recognised strengths of the case study approach as described by Stake (2000:448):

> "Case studies are of value for refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation, as well as helping to establish the limits of generalizability."

Their particular use in a staged study of this kind comes from their potential to be selected based on their fit (or otherwise) with previous theory (Yin, 1994), for the purposes of 'theory-testing' as well as 'theory-building' (Layder, 1993; Denscombe, 1998). Together, these reasons made a case study approach particularly well suited to a methodology based on continual problematisation.

However, as Yin (1994) acknowledges, this embedded multiple case study approach had the potential disadvantage of being very time and resource intensive. This meant constantly being alert to limiting case boundaries, to prevent them from becoming ever-expanding, and balancing this approach with other methods as described below. Thus, for example, whilst individual conferences attended might be considered a case, in practice these were just treated as an instance of participant observation, as the time spent researching a thorough history, organisational context, etc. for all the conferences attended would have detracted from the overall research process.

The time and resource implications were also mitigated to a degree by the relatively small groups/organisations which were the subject of most of the embedded studies. Whilst the research nominally involved a relatively small number of primary sites, the wider contact enabled by critically using infrastructure bodies as both gatekeepers and participants provided access to a much broader range of respondents than might otherwise have been possible. This is because 'infrastructure

organisations', as defined earlier in the thesis, are those bodies primarily providing support, guidance and/or services to other organisations and/or practitioners, rather than directly to the public. The exact combination of work undertaken varies between infrastructure organisations, but typically includes activities such as training, the provision of consultancy-style expertise and directive development support, individual mentoring and non-directive encouragement, arranging networking opportunities, facilitating shared access to resources, developing guidance and organising/campaigning on issues of collective member concern. Some of these organisations also facilitate access to funding or distribute funding. Some are independent bodies, with differing degrees of accountability to their members/users, whereas others are closely linked to other organisations, such as the larger denominational structures or government departments. Examples of national infrastructure bodies in this research field included the Christian Community Work Alliance, the Church Urban Fund and Faithworks; examples of sub-regional/regional infrastructure bodies included the Active Faith Communities Programme and the Churches Regional Commissions.[10] Thus, whilst the number of overall sites was

---

[10] For more information, see www.ccwa.org.uk ; www.cuf.org.uk ; www.faithworks.info ; www.activefaiths.org.uk ; and, for example, www.northeastchurches.org.uk respectively.

relatively small, the validity of the findings was potentially improved by the subsequent reach and overview which these sites enabled to be accessed. (In the process of doing this, however, the researcher was alert to the possibility that such organisations might have agendas and issues of their own, with a critical study of this being facilitated by the overall case study approach and a particular concern with listening to the diversity of practitioner voices as well as established infrastructure 'stakeholders'. Broadly speaking, the more substantial role that any particular body played in the research itself (e.g. as a significant gatekeeper), the more time was spent analysing that particular body as a potential case in and of itself.

Ethical Issues, Gatekeepers and Negotiating Access

By adopting this approach, a particular issue was the use of some of these infrastructure bodies as gatekeepers through which to negotiate access. The support of these gatekeepers (and the trust that this engendered in others who trusted them) often enabled access to situations and people which would otherwise have been closed to such involvement (Hornsby-Smith, 1993). The unique access granted to a meeting of religious representatives from across a northern city on the same day that it was discovered that there was a local connection to one of the London bombers on 7th July 2005 was a case in point. In all such situations, care was taken to ensure that people were aware of my role and given the option to give or withdraw their informed consent for my

presence. Where possible, this information was given in advance. For example, when conducting participant observation alongside the Chief Executive of the Active Faith Communities Programme, the member of staff who was being shadowed emailed everyone he planned to meet during that week in advance. This email contained information about the study and my role, and gave people the option to contact him if they did not wish for me to attend with him.

Throughout the research, additional ethical issues were addressed in accordance with the Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association (2002). This included taking care to introduce my research role in accessible terms, with clear expectations in terms of confidentiality, at the outset when I was first introduced to a new individual or group, and potential participants given the option to choose whether they were happy for me to continue attending. If people appeared uncomfortable or asked for space to talk with the gatekeeper, care was taken to excuse myself unless I was clearly invited to remain. Because the observations had been organised in a particularly fluid way, to fit around participants' diary commitments, it was possible to manage this in such a way as to make opting in or out equally acceptable, avoiding any undue pressure on participants to participate unless they so wished. Having said this, in the vast majority of instances, participants were comfortable with my presence and indeed often actively encouraged me to remain. In part, this seemed to be due to gratitude

that someone was taking the time to try to understand what they were doing and why; in part, it seemed to be because they were themselves interested in aspects of the research topic; in part it was because the questions I was asking frequently blended in with the reflective questions being asked by the advisor/practitioner I was accompanying; and in part because they seemed to find the questions being asked thought-provoking and helpful in enabling them to reflect and develop their own work.

Accessing additional respondents through these primary gatekeepers also generally aided my ability to preserve the confidentiality of the secondary respondents observed through accompanying them. Secondary respondents already had existing confidentiality arrangements in terms of what they shared with the gatekeeper, and were offered similar levels of confidentiality in terms of this research process. Hence, it was possible to ensure that any individual secondary respondent would not be identifiable in the final thesis. This was because the gatekeepers in this instance were engaged with multiple such groups across a wide area, and the research as a whole was drawing from similar groups across the country. The primary gatekeepers, on the other hand, were wishing to operate in the public domain, and frequently welcomed analysis, scrutiny and publicity for their work in the hope that this would raise awareness of the need for their work and improve wider understanding of it. In those cases where detailed participant

observation was carried out, these organisations actively chose that they would prefer to be identifiable, providing this would not prejudice the confidentiality of secondary respondents. Where this request was honoured in this thesis, these organisations were given the opportunity to comment on early drafts, to ensure that they were able to make a request if they felt anything needed to be clarified or if there had been a misrepresentation of their work. Should agreement have failed to have been reached over any requested amendment, and in particular if the researcher felt that any requested amendment was not in keeping with the data gathered, the option of retaining anonymity at this level was retained. For their part, organisations were in principle allowed to retain a veto over the use of any confidential internal information relating to their own operation (although in practice this was not exercised). In practice, aside from minor points of clarification which the researcher accepted, and further questions which were raised from feedback given and incorporated in subsequent drafts, no significant conflict occurred, despite the constructive challenge which much of the material posed.

However, because of this, gatekeepers were used with the awareness that they could introduce bias in the process of facilitating access to some groups rather than others, or otherwise affect the process (Hornsby-Smith, 1993). To counter this, where possible, a broad range of methods were used to cross-check the information accessed via

infrastructure gatekeepers, not least independently making contact with alternative sources at each stage of the process. In the interest of ethics, care was also taken to ensure that a clear agreement was negotiated from the outset concerning mutual expectations from involvement in the research, taking into account the gatekeeper's and other participants' interests (Fielding, 1993a:159-160). For those providing more substantial input, detailed reports tailored to their initial reasons for involvement were provided as a by-product of the research, ensuring that there was a mutual benefit for their involvement. For those encountered within individual observations or interviews, access was frequently facilitated by the researcher's prior experience of managing and advising similar organisations, with which many participants were able to identify. This meant that after an encounter had been observed, or an interview conducted, additional resources or suggestions could often be offered which might help them continue developing their work. Ethically, this helped to fulfil the principle of giving something back to those who were willing to participate freely in the research.

4.5 Rationale for Sites & Methods Selected at Each Stage

Stage 1

The first stage of the research was focused on the wide national context, with the aim of starting the research by gaining a broad initial overview of different perspectives on Christian community work. To gather data on this national context, a number of key sites were identified. These key sites were the places where different 'good practice' discourses were being communicated to others, often with the intention of supporting or influencing them, on a national, regional or sub-regional basis. They were also the places where particular individuals might have an awareness of the discourses and factors affecting decision-making at national strategic levels, as well as an overview of the issues they perceived as affecting those involved at these levels. The key sites identified included government policy-making processes, related national infrastructure bodies, other related organisations covering a broad geographic area or membership, related conferences which brought together practitioners for training or sharing purposes, and related grey literature (guidance, reports, case studies, occupational standards, etc.).

The specific data collection processes which were carried out for this stage are summarised in Table 1. Firstly, 16 formal semi-structured interviews were carried out with key figures who had been identified as

active at this national and regional level. A full list of these interviewees is provided in Appendix A. These particular interviewees were mainly selected on the basis that they could represent the organisations most visible in the initial literature search in terms of operating on this level. Within the limited number of interviews able to be conducted, care was taken to ensure that the range of interviewees covered both people clearly within established church structures and others who were more engaged in para-church bodies, government or independent bodies, including some which were multi-faith in nature. Many of the respondents were involved in the field in several capacities, including in paid and voluntary roles. A balance was achieved between respondents with primarily national remits and those with regional/sub-regional ones. For those respondents whose area of responsibility involved a geographical remit which was smaller than national, care was taken to ensure that a spread between diverse areas was included. This process of identifying, contacting and carrying out interviews with these key figures was an evolving one, with the contact-making process being assisted by the second part of this stage of the research, namely the attendance at relevant conferences (see below). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the best means for conducting this part of the research because they enabled an initial exploration of the identified key themes of the research through an initially-determined set of

questions, whilst allowing flexibility in the way that these were deployed and in the subsequent discussion (Bryman, 2001).

In addition to these interviews, participant observation was conducted at 12 relevant conferences, drawing on May's (2001:146-174) discussion of this approach. These conferences were selected on similar lines to the interviews, with the additional consideration of wanting to ensure that diverse potential audience-participants were included in the likely attendees overall. The conferences were also selected to enable different possible presentations of 'good practice' to be investigated as presented to wide-ranging local and national audiences. These conferences typically included a combination of both paid infrastructure staff members and volunteers/paid staff from particular local organisations engaged directly in some form of community work.

The use of participant observation as a method proved to be an effective way of building up a 'practitioner's eye view' of the different discourses about good practice being promoted, not least in hearing diverse responses from fellow participants to the 'official' messages being promoted by those leading the events. Thus, as well as gathering data from the official presentations (in the form of my own field notes and often official copies of presentation slides or recordings), this method also enabled multiple informal discussions during coffee and lunch breaks with a wide range of people from all over the country. This enabled a broad range of contacts to be developed with practitioners

and other interested parties from a cross-section of different local situations and perspectives. It also enabled myriad informal conversations to be conducted in an informal manner with these parties, in a context where it was seen as quite natural to ask about their experience and perspective on Christian community work. These conversations typically began, after a short exchange of names and where we were from, with me asking the other conference attendee to tell me about the work that they were involved in and how it had developed. These stories almost inevitably turned out to reflect the same prominent trajectory described by the more formal interviewees, as described in Chapter 5.

Both the conference attendance and the more formal interviews also proved helpful in collecting a broad range of associated national and locally-published literature discussing faith-related community work in the English context. This literature included research studies, published accounts of exemplar projects and papers written by practitioners exploring related issues; where these have been used throughout the thesis, they have been cited in Harvard format.

(In addition to these practitioner-oriented conferences, I also attended several academic conferences and engaged in informal discussions with academics that had worked on related research. These discussions and conferences were helpful in informing the initial research scoping and framing process, and latterly in providing critiques on initial

presentations of findings. The academic conferences are listed separately in Appendix F).

Stage 2

Having gained an overview of prominent issues at a national level, the second stage of the research aimed to explore these issues further through participant observation of everyday interactions between an infrastructure body and the local projects with whom they worked. Several infrastructure bodies were identified which could potentially be used as the focus of the research at this stage, each of which met the broad requirements highlighted above. During initial discussions, several of these organisations indicated their willingness in principle to participate in this way, although one subsequently proved difficult to take this forward with. The final decision was made to focus on the Active Faith Communities Programme (AFC) for a number of reasons, which will now be outlined.

The historical reasons for AFC's establishment are described on its website as follows (Active Faith Communities, 2007):

> "AFC was formed in 2002 to address the lack of equitable access of faith based organisations in the West Yorkshire area to resources and funding. Some of the barriers to access included lack of organisational and personal capacity. Whilst a number of interfaith projects were in operation, work was patchy and disparate. The

desire to encourage community work by faith communities in a more planned and sustained manner therefore led to the formation of AFC initially led by the Church of England dioceses of Bradford and Ripon and Leeds."

The stated purpose of AFC at the time of the research was described in its publicity material as follows (Active Faith Communities Programme, 2005:2):

"The mission of the Active Faith Communities Programme is to work with faith communities and faith-based organisations across West Yorkshire:

- To support existing projects

- To encourage new initiatives and help to turn dreams into reality

- To develop and manage specific schemes that may act as pilots or transferable models (e.g. the Bradford Faith Cohesion Programme)

- To create networks of faith-based community-related work, so that people can learn from one another and develop models of good practice

- To raise the profile of faith-based organisations and the value of their contribution to the community and society as a whole

- To use local experience on the ground to seek to inform and influence regional and national programmes and policies

- To undertake research and produce publications on issues of faith and society

- Our aim is to maximise the capacity of faith communities to develop and enhance the lives of the neighbourhoods and communities of interest in which they are placed"

They describe the range of groups that they work with as being "faith communities" involved in the following range of activities:

"Some already play a significant role in major schemes and enterprises –

- As partners in regeneration and neighbourhood renewal schemes

- As initiators of social businesses and enterprises, providing community services and helping to boost the local economy

- As faith-based organisations undertaking work in specialised areas such as counselling, drug schemes, training and employment, youth work, etc.

Some work more locally, setting up and running projects or using their building and the efforts of their members, to respond to the needs of the neighbourhoods in which they are based. For example:

- Playgroups and parent, carer and toddler groups

- Out-of-school activities including homework clubs, Saturday schools, and faith- or culturally-specific educational opportunities
- Youth clubs and play schemes
- Self-help groups and activities meeting the needs of specific sectors
- Adult education programmes, job clubs, training schemes
- Sessions to develop people's confidence and self-esteem
- Advice Centres, Internet Cafés and IT projects
- Older people's groups and lunch clubs
- Drop-in centres and neighbourhood care schemes

Others may just be beginning to explore the process:

- They may have ideas, hopes, dreams and visions of what they would like to achieve
- They may be researching local needs or looking for partners to work with
- They may have feasibility studies, business plans and drawings
- They may have found none of the funds, some of the funds or all of the funds

Common to all is that, motivated by their various faiths, they are seeking to work with others to build a better, healthier, fairer, more viable and enriched society by putting their resources at the

disposal of the community and creating new hope and opportunities in some of the most under-resourced and socially isolated areas and sectors." (Active Faith Communities Programme, 2005:2)

To provide support to these groups, AFC offered advice and support in the following areas:

- "Developing the vision – helping to be clear about what is really wanted, collecting the evidence to show it is needed, reaching a common mind

- Strategic Planning & making it happen – working out what needs to be done, and in what order, and then turning the words into practical action

- Organisational development – building the right structure to set things up and keep them going, including applying for charitable and company status; building partnerships; good practice in communities and trusteeship

- Policy development and review – keeping abreast of legislation and applying policies to bring practical benefit

- Business planning – setting out the case, demonstrating credibility, showing how it will work and where the money's coming from

- Finding the funding – making good applications to the most likely course

- Keeping it all going – monitoring and evaluating the work; managing change; dealing with phase 2, 3 and beyond

- Human resources – making the most of staff and volunteers, including recruitment and good practice" (Active Faith Communities Programme, 2005:3)

This support was delivered to client groups through one-off sessions; telephone advice; planning/review workshops; longer-term support with individual groups; mentoring for staff, volunteers and trustees; and building networks. In addition, AFC directly ran selected projects relating to cohesion, including organising an Inter-Cultural Communication and Leadership School residential bringing together young people identified as potential community leaders from across diverse communities.[11]

AFC itself was established by two Church of England Dioceses in 2002 as a charitable company limited by guarantee, with the dioceses as the two initial controlling members.[12] The organisation had developed a multi-

---

[11] See www.intercivilization.net for more details.

[12] Registered Charity No. 1094565; Company Limited by Guarantee No. 4383390. Further statutory registration information can be found by searching using these numbers on www.charitycommission.gov.uk and www.companieshouse.gov.uk . The organisation itself currently maintains a website at www.activefaiths.org.uk .

faith board of 10 trustees and a company secretary, chaired by one of the Anglican Bishops. In the financial year 1st April 2005 to 31st March 2006, the organisation had an annual gross income of £245,512 and a total expenditure of £167,499.[13] At the time of the research, the organisation had 3 staff: the Chief Executive, who also did the bulk of the support work offered to faith groups; a development worker for cohesion-related issues and an administrator. In the six month period May to August 2005, the Chief Executive had reported supporting 22 different community work projects directly, whilst developing and maintaining links with over 17 district/region-wide bodies/networks and further developing their own capacity to offer support to more groups.[14]

Thus, this organisation met the theoretical sampling criteria in a number of ways. Firstly, the organisation was clearly operating at the intersection between smaller local projects and the wider regional/national policy arenas. Secondly, the groups it was supporting were broad ranging, with the factor in common that they "intend to work for the benefit of the wider community rather than exclusively for

---

[13] Financial information taken from the annual returns as submitted to the Charity Commission, made available on their website www.charitycommission.gov.uk .

[14] Information taken from 'AFCP Chief Executive's Report: May – August 2005', as presented to the Meeting of the Board of Directors attended on 21st September 2005.

their own adherents" (Active Faith Communities Programme, 2005:4). This matched my initial definition of Christian 'community work' for the purposes of the thesis, whilst including this work specifically in a context of diversity and dialogue with other faith groups engaged in similar activities.

Thirdly, the organisation's expressed interest was in promoting and sharing 'good practice' in a number of respects, as the aims and methods reproduced above clearly state. AFC's focus on providing advice and support to organisations and practitioners involved in community work facilitated access to a range of these local organisations in the context of them receiving advice on and discussing 'good practice'. The mentoring and individual/group methods of offering support also fitted well with the broad dialogical methods chosen, with the Chief Executive being willing to offer significant access to the organisation and participate fully in the research process.

Fourthly, AFC was an organisation aiming to have coverage of more than one faith, whilst having Christian roots. This was perhaps the broadest of many infrastructure bodies observed, with the main alternatives being those which were secular in constitution, those which were exclusively focused on Christian activity, and those which were focused on supporting 'Black and Minority Ethnic' concerns. By selecting a body which was specifically concerned with faith, but in its broadest sense, the research could be focused without losing its concern with diversity.

AFC's historical legacy of having been established through an Anglican initiative, but aiming to work across faiths, reflected a previous recurring theme of Anglicans taking a lead role in structural initiatives due to the established church's relative size, resources, networks and political influence. Here it had resulted in AFC being in the curious position of being a charitable company limited by guarantee aiming to work across multiple faith traditions whose membership consisted solely of the two founding Anglican Dioceses. These Dioceses had also been the main initial core funders, together with the Church Urban Fund and regional funding sourced via the Churches Regional Commission for Yorkshire and the Humber.

Lastly, but not least importantly, AFC was chosen because of its particular geographical location and sub-regional coverage of the area of West Yorkshire. This particular location entailed coverage of an area of significant religious, ethnic and cultural diversity, covering the districts of Calderdale, Bradford, Kirklees, Leeds and Wakefield. Because of its sub-regional focus, the work undertaken by AFC was grounded in a particular catchment area (unlike many of the national bodies).

Table 2: Religious Diversity in West Yorkshire

Census responses (April 2001): People stating religion as:	Metropolitan District Wakefield	Metropolitan District Leeds	Metropolitan District Kirklees	Metropolitan District Calderdale	Metropolitan District Bradford
Christian	246,510	492,656	261,128	133,962	281,236
Buddhist	302	1,587	397	350	537
Hindu	617	4,183	1,222	378	4,457
Jewish	111	8,267	171	147	356
Muslim	3,589	21,394	39,312	10,198	75,188
Sikh	266	7,586	2,726	222	4,748
Other religions	560	1,530	772	443	996
No religion	37,008	120,139	54,445	31,562	62,226
Religion not stated	26,209	58,060	28,394	15,143	37,921

(Source: Office for National Statistics website, www.statistics.gov.uk)

Table 3: Ethnic Diversity in West Yorkshire

People stating their ethnicity as:	Wakefield Metropolitan District	Leeds Metropolitan District	Kirklees Metropolitan District	Calderdale Metropolitan District	Bradford Metropolitan District
White: British	304,734	637,872	325,348	174,775	355,684
White: Irish	1,262	8,578	3,458	2,082	3,479
White: Other	2,054	10,632	3,853	2,124	6,878
Mixed: White and Black Caribbean	509	4,603	2,927	613	2,611
Mixed: White and Black African	144	885	268	96	449
Mixed: White and Asian	503	2,516	1,557	547	2,926
Mixed: Other	291	1,733	662	290	951
Asian/Asian British:Indian	980	12,303	15,829	814	12,504
Asian/Asian British: Pakistani	3,174	15,064	26,536	9,442	67,994

People stating their ethnicity as:	Wakefield Metropolitan District	Leeds Metropolitan District	Kirklees Metropolitan District	Calderdale Metropolitan District	Bradford Metropolitan District
Asian or Asian British: Bangladeshi	21	2,537	388	300	4,967
Asian or Asian British: Other Asian	256	2,386	1,352	394	2,932
Black or Black British: Caribbean	191	6,718	4,203	259	3,038
Black or Black British: African	207	2,435	476	128	970
Black or Black British: Other Black	39	1,165	567	50	325
Chinese	493	3,447	611	287	896
Other ethnic group	314	2,528	532	204	1,061

(Census Responses, April 2001; Source: Office for National Statistics website, www.statistics.gov.uk)

For all these reasons, AFC presented itself as a suitable opportunity for this stage of the research, and a range of methods were employed to make use of this opportunity. The primary method used was again a form of participant observation, in the way described by May (2001:146-174). This was supplemented by an analysis of supplementary material and occasional, more in-depth, interviews with relevant people during the course of the process. A summary of the encounters observed, together with the supplementary data gathered, is provided in Appendix C.

The research issues involved in this process shared much in common with those experienced by ethnographers of religion (see, for example, the detailed discussion by various ethnographers in Spickard et al, 2002). The challenges of handling my own identity as a researcher and its potential impact on the process were particularly profound, and are discussed in Section 4.6 below. Equally challenging, at times, were the difficulties associated with trying to take comprehensive notes or audio-record interactions. This was because many of the encounters observed were informal, and in both these and others, the turning on of a dictaphone or the scribbling of extensive notes was likely to disrupt the spontaneity and value of the informal exchange. Hence, in these situations, more attention was paid instead to concentrating on listening to the exchange, with notes being recorded discretely shortly afterwards whilst the exchange was still fresh in the memory. Because of this, and

the dialogical concern with exploring issues with those involved in these exchanges, the research was less concerned with conducting a comprehensive ethnography of the work of the agency than with a more focused observation centred on different perspectives, actions and contexts in relation to the concept of 'good practice'.

Stage 3

The Stage 3 research sites were chosen based on their expected ability to refine or challenge the findings from the previous two stages. As a result, the full rationale for the elements of the research included in Stage 3 depends heavily on the analysis of the earlier findings which is developed in Chapters 5 and 6. However, at this stage, a brief description can be provided of the two distinct parts to this stage which were considered necessary to refine or challenge previous findings, as will now be described. (For a fully itemised description, see Appendix D).

As the analysis of the data developed, this analysis pointed increasingly towards the importance of the practitioner's ability to handle diverse perspectives on 'good practice' and their own and others' diverse identities in their practice. The process by which practitioners learnt to handle this diversity had been implicitly studied throughout, but any consideration of formal professional training had so far been missed

through focusing on the conferences and support offered by other infrastructure bodies. Hence, at this stage, advantage was taken of the opportunity to explore the place of faith within professionally-qualifying community and youth work programmes at Durham University, where the researcher was based. Due to the limited time available, the research focused on a consultation process underway to consider the potential inclusion of an optional faith-related part within the Masters-level programme.

Those contacted were identified through the researcher's and university's existing databases and networks of contacts, with all current agencies providing placement opportunities to Community and Youth Work programme students that had a connection with faith being invited to the focus group. A full list of those who engaged with this process is provided in Appendix D.

In conducting this part of the research process, I initially organised a focus group, which 23 people attended. A focus group was chosen as the best method for this part of the process because it provided an opportunity to use:

> "the interaction within the group as a means for eliciting information, rather than just collecting each individual's point of view – there is a special value placed on the collective view, rather than the aggregate view." (Denscombe, 1998:115)

An additional 13 interviews and 9 brief telephone contacts were made with other people identified as likely to have an interest in the availability of faith-related professional training and development in the region. These were designed to follow up particular issues in more detail with individual contacts, as well as contact certain people who had expressed an interest but who were unable to attend on the day of the focus group. In doing this, they helped to minimise the disadvantages of focus groups, not least their potential to obscure the perspectives of quieter or more isolated attendees.

In addition, five individual interviews were conducted with students who had just finished studying on the 'church-based route' of the previous professionally-qualifying undergraduate Community and Youth Work programme which was in the process of being phased out. These interviews were designed to explore the students' experiences of how faith had been included in the existing programme, and what they felt the university should learn from this in designing future programmes.

Alongside this, additional data was also gathered through attendance at two focus groups organised separately by the Churches Regional Commission in the North East, as part of a broader project aimed at determining the training needs of practitioners in faith-related contexts. Whereas the university focus group and interviews had targeted particular people with more strategic roles, these focus groups tended to attract individual practitioners and volunteers with less strategic

responsibilities and who were concerned with training at levels below Masters level, providing a useful broader counterbalance. The methods and findings from this part of the research process are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, with a comprehensive list included in Appendix D.

The second distinct part of the third stage of the research was a short case study conducted with a particular local project, the Urban Ministry and Theology Project (UMTP). As with AFC above, UMTP staff actively chose to waive the project's right to confidentiality because they consciously wished for their project to be reflectively analysed in the public domain as part of their wish to share and publicise their experience more widely. Broadly speaking, UMTP was selected as a case study because it was an exceptional/'extreme' instance (see Denscombe, 1998) in that it, prima facie, seemed to contrast with many of the findings observed so far. The full rationale for this selection, and the resulting findings, can be found in Chapter 8.

4.6 Reflexively Situating the Research

A primary concern in setting up and undertaking this research was to ensure that issues of reflexivity were handled appropriately. Two particular concerns are addressed in this section, namely the framing of the research study in focusing on Christian community work, and the handling of the dialogical process.

Framing the Research Reflexively

The methodological choice to frame the research in terms of Christian community work in particular, rather than faith-related community work in general, warrants further explanation at this stage.

Within the complexity of global relationships between religion and politics outlined in the initial literature review, one clear finding was that the internal reasoning, belief structure, history and political context of religious belief all make a significant difference on the way in which these beliefs manifest themselves through believers in wider society (McGuire, 1992; Haynes, 1998; Bruce, 2003). In this context, the task of trying to critically understand several complex different religions, each with their own centuries or millennia of theological thought, debate and history, as applied into individual practice, was an impossibly-daunting task, particularly given the desire to structure the research design so that tentative meaningful findings can be drawn within the time available. Trying, within a three year PhD study, to capture this, is likely to result in less theoretically valid findings than a narrower focus on one religion, which would enable the researcher to explore at least some of these different intra-religious traditions by testing any theoretical findings in a range of different settings within that tradition. Such findings could, then, be explored, tested and developed for their application in other religious settings by other researchers or future studies.

Given this decision to focus on one particular religion, and the complexity and debate even within intra-religious theologies, a basic familiarity with the religion to be studied was likely to be a considerable asset in understanding different points of view, providing such knowledge is treated tentatively and is open to reconsideration in response to the data gathered.

The choice of Christianity as the particular religion to be studied for this research project is based on a number of important factors which affect the methods adopted, reflexivity/bias issues, and ethical issues (discussed further below). A significant factor in choosing Christianity as the specific focus for this research is this particular researcher's prior understanding of many of the Christian traditions, based on previous contact with and participation in a range of these traditions over the past 20 years (see Section 1.3).

Such a decision to concentrate on one religion, and in particular the religious tradition occupied and identified with by this particular researcher, could potentially be open to challenge on at least two related grounds – (i) In the interests of empirical 'objectivity', and (ii) in the interests of incorporating the 'dialogue and difference' elements of the original research proposal.

Addressing the first of these challenges (and ultimately the second) requires that the research is set in the context of contemporary

ontological and epistemological debates within social science, starting with Vidich and Lyman's (2000) recognition that both sociology and anthropology originally grew out of attempts to understand "the other" (including the religious and cultural 'other', initially through missionary and later settlement activity). Religion (and Christianity in particular) appears to have played a particularly important role in the development of this thought, which Vidich and Lyman trace.

However, the contemporary global changes described earlier in the literature review have led to a cultural pluralism and de-centring of the world in which social scientists (especially ethnographers and others concerned with culture) "now find themselves caught in the cross fire of incommensurable but competing values" (Vidich and Lyman, 2000:45).

The issues at the heart of this research remain fundamentally linked to the central debates in social science which have developed in recent years. In particular, the challenges facing social science (and particularly qualitative research) in this context are summarised by Denzin and Lincoln (2000:17) as a "triple crisis of representation, legitimation and praxis ... [e]mbedded in the discourse of poststructuralism and postmodernism", central to all of which has been the changing understanding of the researcher's relationship with 'the other'. In this context, Shanafelt (2002:1) argues that:

"Because conflicts over truth are an increasingly prominent feature of our globalizing world, now more than ever must they be dealt with directly."

In this context, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) locate qualitative research itself as now being in a seventh historical 'moment' or stage, with this moment being concerned with moral discourse. Denzin and Lincoln argue that, in this moment, social science and the humanities should "become sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom and community" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:5). The literature review clearly demonstrates how the macro issues of the relationship between religion and politics, and the micro issues relating to how they work themselves out in particular settings such as community work and regeneration in England, become such a site. The particular focus on critically exploring notions of 'good practice' highlights the potential moral dimension of the study. Within such a context, there is an increasing recognition that all research is value-based (May, 2001), and that "the age of value-free inquiry for the human disciplines is over" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

As such, the experience of this researcher, which encompasses not only intellectual familiarity with complex (and occasionally rival) theologies but also a personal Christian faith position, locates and owns the engagement with the research material as a fundamental aspect of

honesty and transparency by explicitly and reflectively recognising the researcher's role in social study.

Theoretically, it also provides a way to deal with the longstanding issues in terms of sociologically defining 'religion', as outlined earlier in the thesis (see Section 2.2). Traditionally, sociologists have either adopted a substantive approach (defining 'what religion is') or a functional approach (defining 'what religion does for the individual and social group') (McGuire, 1992:11-15). Each of these strategies, however, is particularly problematic in terms of the different interpretations that result when applied to issues of social change, secularization, the relationship between religion and other institutions in society, and new forms of religion (McGuire, 1992:15). As a result, neither definitional approach is especially useful for this study, because the study is concerned with all these issues. Hence, instead, this research *starts* from the position of recognising all of those claiming to be influenced or related, individually or organisationally, by the Christian faith as suitable for inclusion in the research. However, it does not *stop* there, but instead aims to critically analyse their claims and actions in comparison to each other and related research. In doing this, the research draws on Bloor's (1997) analysis of the potential of qualitative research focused on practitioner's work to improve practice by inviting practitioners to compare their practices with others. It also avoids including yet another problematic term, 'religion', within the main field of study, whilst

recognising that (like the earlier discussion of 'race' in Section 2.6) such problematic socially-constructed terms are real in their effects.

A further potential criticism of this choice of focus on Christian community work could be based on the original research proposal's aim to address issues of dialogue and difference in practice. However, rather than abandon the dialogue and difference elements of the original proposal, the decision to focus on Christian community work is designed to bring these into sharper focus by incorporating their implications into the overall research design. By locating this study of dialogue and difference, thus recognising its situatedness, more potential is created to reflect critically on the central issues of identity and the broader ontological, epistemological, political and religious worldviews which are at the heart of this research. (The implications for this in terms of research practice are further considered in the separate discussions of ethical issues). In this research, these issues have been handled by focusing on an issue of common, if contested, concern ('good practice') in a particular sphere of socio-political action ('Christian community work'), and then using this focus to explore how different people operating within it relate to other faith/value bases, including those who nominally hold the same faith position but apply it differently. However, as diversity remained a key part of the overall research topic, great care was taken to ensure that different ways of engaging with

difference became a major criterion in selecting the combination of research sites.

Handling Dialogical Research Ethically Without Compromising Validity

As already acknowledged in Chapter 1, the initial choice of research topic arose from a series of experientially-based questions. This choice of topic and the methods-related issues discussed above were just a few examples of the ways in which the researcher's identity and the chosen dialogical approach raised ethical and methodological issues relating to reflexivity. In asking questions and engaging in dialogue over issues of identity and religion, being aware of the possible impact of my own personal identity was crucially important (Coleman, 2002; Landres, 2002). In numerous situations, different aspects of my identity (including being white, British, Christian, male, professional, etc.) created a dynamic to an encounter with others who did or did not share these characteristics, and which shaped (at least to some degree) the resulting encounter. By being aware of the potential impact of these dynamics, they could frequently be proactively managed and enlisted in the development of the research itself through careful management of the researcher role.

For example, a certain degree of personal disclosure was crucial in gaining access to organisations if the access was to include the depth of

remit to ask challenging questions and spend significant time alongside them (Landres, 2002). In many cases, as indicated above, this resulted in organisations seeing the potential for the research to generate significant reflexive information and analysis about their activities that they might be too close to see. This was aided by these organisations being aware that the research would involve a critical conversation with someone (the researcher) who already had a broad knowledge of a range of related knowledge (e.g. in the fields of professional community work, management, policy, etc.). Interviewees often opened the conversation (either at interview, or before they agreed to arrange an interview) by asking why I was interested in this field, and what I was aiming to get out of it. This included in some cases when interviewees expressed an initial suspicion about the agenda behind the research, given that the topic remains controversial both politically and religiously. As such, my diverse credentials in related fields (including my personal faith; teaching at Durham University; experience of working in a church setting, working for a para-church organisation and managing a church-initiated project; qualifications; and membership of a related non-departmental public body[15]) often opened doors which might otherwise have remained shut to less broadly-experienced researchers. Because of the diversity of these credentials, they also positioned me in a place

---

[15] See Section 1.3 for full details.

where respondents were less able to pigeon-hole me into a stereotypical 'audience' box, for which they already had a pre-prepared discourse. I was aware at times of needing to build up a rapport and empathy with respondents, which could quickly be achieved by disclosing similar experience in my previous and/or past roles, whilst being conscious to avoid over-identifying with any one particular position (also see Landres, 2002). In practice, this often involved shifting between the experience and different identity position/perspective gained in different roles to encourage respondents to consider how their responses might differ with different people asking the question, and then encourage them to reflect further on what, if anything, held their responses together coherently for them as individual practitioners and organisations.

The freedom of the participant observation and semi-structured process was important in this, with probing being a key technique used (Fielding, 1993b:140-141). Many of the probing questions asked in response to respondents' initial answers were of the nature 'You said earlier….. How does that relate to what you have just said?'. Quite often, this seemed to cause respondents to stop, give a response such as 'That's a good question!', think carefully, and take considerable time trying to articulate a response. Indeed, sometimes they were unable to do so, only then recognising that the two perspectives that they had given did not logically combine easily with each other. Frequently, this also acted as a check on my interpretive schema, as respondents were then able to

explain their definitions of words and concepts they had used (which often differed from mine in some important way), and this then allowed any differences to be explored to generate increased understanding. Particular care was taken to ensure that these questions were always asked in a respectful way, despite their content often being challenging.

At each stage of the research, particular attention was also paid to identifying and analysing 'critical incidents'. These were situations where several of the key research themes came together in one particular occurrence. When analysed, these situations could be used to illustrate some of the most interesting dynamics uncovered by epitomising in one instance some aspects of how the issues could relate to each other. Often these 'critical incidents' involved situations where respondents felt they experienced ethical challenges or dilemmas, especially where they felt different principles, values, beliefs or views of 'good practice' conflicted with each other. In other instances, these 'critical incidents' emerged from the dialogical encounter between the researcher, a particular respondent and perhaps a particular shared observation/intervention, in which the internal perspectives of those involved in the dialogue were felt to be consistent, but which experienced conflict when considering how they might be commensurable. Analysis of these incidents proved to be one of the most productive ways of clarifying the issues at hand, and generating improved ways of understanding the complexity of the different ways

people understood 'good practice' in particular contexts and more generally. Particular examples of these 'critical incidents' are referred to throughout the presentation of findings in subsequent chapters.

In participating in these critical discussions, there was a particular need to acknowledge that I brought to the research process my own background, professional training, experience and particular understandings of what constituted 'good practice'. By acknowledging that this was potentially a factor, it was important that this prior position was subject to transparent critique as part of the research process.

To handle this, the research drew on techniques and understandings developed through action research (Stringer, 1999; McNiff and Whitehead, 2002), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and practical theology (Swinton and Mowat, 2006) approaches to knowledge/learning. Ethically, this resulted in a more involved style of research, with discourse and dialogue between different perspectives on 'good practice' (including my own) being an essential part of the research process, with all being subject to critique. An increasing familiarity with different points of view on what constitutes 'good practice' (including my own), together with an ability to pose these and discuss these with a wide range of protagonists, enabled the research to dig beneath the surface to uncover the tensions that are the subject of the research question.

Particular care was taken to avoid contaminating data collection too soon in the process by introducing alternative views too early in a research encounter. Instead, deliberate care was taken to stick to open questions at the beginning of any encounter, drawing out an individual's own perspective before moving into more probing interaction. It was only even further into the encounter that consideration was given to sharing some aspect of previous findings or perspectives from the research so far, enabling alternative perspectives to be gained on these after other data had already been collected. The meaning of 'encounter' here was variable in terms of the time period involved. For one-off interviews, this would be during the course of the interview itself. For primary case study organisations, this took place over a number of weeks. Thus, the dialogical approach to learning described by Freire, based on aspects of problematisation, could be used following more traditional methods to establish respondents' initial perspectives. This dialogical approach also drew from feminist influences on research, cognisant of the potential impact of power in relationships, whilst also endeavouring to engage with those studied as equals in the research process by building rapport and analytical involvement through reciprocal dialogue (May, 2001).

One other potential disadvantage of this dialogical approach, on reflection, was that it potentially restricted the involvement of those who were less willing to reflect critically on their own practice and

faith, especially in terms of the more intensive participant observation work. Different infrastructure organisations, of course, often had their own agendas, and it was important to recognise that critical analysis of these agendas would not necessarily always be welcome. However, care was taken to ensure that these types of organisations were fully included and represented in the broader interviews and focus groups, and these organisations were also represented in those with whom the primary organisations engaged. For example, in the second case study, some of the organisations receiving infrastructure support were less open to critical reflection on their practice, even if the organisation I was working alongside most closely (the infrastructure organisation itself) was open to this.

4.7 Data Analysis

The dialogical process above formed a core part of the analysis process, enabling much of the analysis to be undertaken progressively *with* participant respondents, rather than in a detached way after the exchange by the researcher reviewing the information that they had provided.

In this respect, the research process itself becomes a form of 'relational practice' which allows findings to be co-produced through an evolving series of dialectical exchanges (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002). In this respect, as outlined above, the research drew on developing modes of

action research, where the reflection engendered by the research process itself contributes to the analysis. Thus, a crucial part of the analysis process was integrated into the research encounters and engagement in research sites outlined above. Having said this, the recording of these interactions in the ways outlined above (and detailed in the Appendices) enabled further reflection and analysis to be conducted in more traditional means.

Formal interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically with the support of NVIVO software (see Bryman, 2001). This involved an open coding process by which each part of each interview was gone through in turn in order to consider what general point/s or theme/s were being raised. The relevant passages of text were then labelled with an appropriate code summarising this point or theme. After working through all the interviews in any one particular stage, the relationship of the different themes was analysed with the aid of the software, with the most common themes acting as the focus for the analysis and subsequent writing up process. The table in Appendix G illustrates the frequency of these most common themes as evidence for the priority attached to the discussion of related issues in the subsequent chapters. However, much more important than this rather mechanical process was the quality of the dialogue which arose from the research process itself, which stimulated broader reflection. Within this, and in keeping with the broader methodological framework, individual insights and approaches

which differed significantly from the majority view or pattern were also important, and hence these too have been reflected accordingly in the analysis presented.

Additional data from participant observation (including the notes taken and accompanying material collected) were reviewed in the process of writing up initial reflections on particular parts of the process. In Stages 2 and 3, these initial reflections were then distributed to the various participants in the process with a view to eliciting further reflective responses and feedback to refine this analysis further. In the more detailed case studies concerning the Active Faith Communities Programme and the Urban Ministry and Theology Project, meetings were held with key individuals and with the respective management committees to present these findings and create opportunities for participants to contribute to and/or participate in refining the analysis produced.

At key points, principally after each stage, the themes emerging from the analysis process were grouped where appropriate, with the relationship between themes being considered. This process led to an identification of the particular themes which connected many of the other themes together. The connections between these overall themes then contributed to the emergence of the overall thesis narrative.

4.8 Conclusion & Approach to Presenting Findings

The methodological process described above led to the generation of an overall research analysis centred on several key thematic dynamics. Common trends in these dynamics, and their effects on individual organisations and practitioners, are presented first, supported by evidence from the first two stages of the research. To do this, Chapter 5 considers the findings concerning organisational level dynamics affecting individual community work 'projects', analysing the impact of diverse agendas and identities in their development trajectories over time. Chapter 6 then goes on to consider the individual practitioner perspectives missing from this discussion, and the difficulties they experience in responding to practice diversity using the existing rationales promoted by policy and many of the broader infrastructure agency discourses. This discussion is developed further in Chapter 7, which explores the specific findings from the Stage 3 research into the place of faith in professional education and development. Chapter 8 finishes the portrayal of the findings by considering what the final unusual case study, the Urban Ministry and Theology Project, contributes to the broader findings.

In presenting the analysis in this way, each chapter draws mainly on the particular stages of the research indicated in order to tell the story of how the analysis developed, beginning with the wider data and working

through to more local and individual perspectives. However, where appropriate, additional supporting material is drawn or cross-referenced from other stages of the research to illustrate how the findings from one section of the research correlated with those from another.

Having laid this foundation for the subsequent chapters, the findings will now be presented, starting with an analysis of the impact of the wider trends and dynamics on local organisations involved in Christian community work activities.

Chapter 5: Changing Organisational Dynamics: "Giving it Away", "Selling Out" Or "Creative Spaces"?

5.1 Introduction to Organisational Level Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the first two stages of the research process described in Chapter 4 as they relate to the organisational dynamics experienced by those involved in Christian community work. The accounts of practitioners, volunteers, management committee members and infrastructure staff are summarised through an analysis of the prevalent patterns of change in organisational governance and ownership, as this proved to be the connecting theme from these stages of the research.

Through analysing these perspectives, observations and accounts, the impact of the contextual forces outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 are explored as they relate to Christian community work in England. By setting these organisational experiences in the broader context of debates on faith-related social action and the role of faith in public life, this analysis highlights significant limitations in the current discourses and approaches to policy and practice. Several forces are shown to be shaping changing patterns of organisational ownership over time. These

are frequently found to contribute to divergent or destructive tendencies between congregations and the social initiatives which they establish. The claims of these initiatives to make a 'distinctive contribution' are critically analysed, finding much diversity between respondents' perspectives. Nevertheless, this community work is shown to be important because it results in the creation of creative organisational spaces that enable personal, social and organisational learning for all those involved. However, the forces and resulting organisational trajectories identified severely constrain the ability of these spaces to realise all of their anticipated potential, whether in local stakeholders' or national policy-makers' terms.

5.2 'Creating a Space for Encounter' – The Character of Christian Community Work Spaces

The first striking finding from the research was the diversity of organisational forms taken by Christian community work. As highlighted in the literature review in Chapter 3, the policy framework relating to engagement with religious groups has been based on a terminology of 'faith communities'. Earlier research had already begun to critique the use of this term in a rhetorical way as part of the broader communitarian attempt to co-opt faith-related organisations into the New Labour political project (Smith, 2004a; Furbey and Macey, 2005).

However, the research for this thesis found that the use of this term also obscured the diversity of organisational and legal structures adopted by faith-related practitioners and collectivities in undertaking community work, both by themselves and with others. This was particularly surprising given the profound impact that such structures were found to have on the nature of the work being undertaken, as this chapter will explore.

A number of researchers have begun to undertake a more detailed analysis of the sociological, cultural, theological, organisational and managerial elements that make up local congregations (Harris, 1998; Harris and Torry, 2000; Cameron, Richter et al, 2005; Torry, 2005). However, in using the terminology of 'faith communities', the research for this thesis found that the overwhelming bulk of the literature available to practitioners, particularly from a policy perspective, failed to recognise that community work is not necessarily carried out by local congregations in their entirety.

This contrasted directly with the data gathered through the interviews and participant observation conducted during stages 1 and 2 of the

research[16]. An analysis of this data showed instead that individuals and small groups, motivated by diverse theologies and reasons, from within one congregation or across a number of congregations (or even not attending any particular congregation), may get together to engage in a particular 'project'. These individuals and groups, either by default or choice, can end up operating in a range of legal organisational forms, including unincorporated associations, unincorporated charities, incorporated organisations (charitable or non-charitable), as part of not-for-profit community enterprises, governmental organisations or partnerships (however constituted), or operating under the legal umbrella of another body, such as the congregation or denomination themselves. One staff member working for a national infrastructure body, who had extensive experience of working with Christian community work 'projects', described this diversity of organisational forms in the following way:

---

[16] An example of the evidence for this can be seen in Appendix C, in the diversity of individuals and groups requesting support with their community work from the infrastructure body studied.

"Often things start from an individual church, and they then either just sort of run that thing through their PCC[17] or whatever. Some of them will try to set up a separate management group that will try and bring on board other churches, or other Christians with expertise. So they might get a Christian who works in a Social Work Department. Some of them will branch out a bit further than that, and get people who are not necessarily Christians, but you're now getting into a different theological view. So they might say 'We want a representative of the community association', ... or something like that, who doesn't have to be a Christian, they are just coming as a representative. And I think that is probably the range... There is one project which was set up by a group of churches, and so had representatives on its management committee, had representatives of each church on its management committee. So it's that sort of mixture really. And most of them either operate as an unincorporated management committee, or they will set themselves up as a charity, or even some of the bigger ones as a company limited by guarantee."

---

[17] 'PCC' is an abbreviation for 'Parochial Church Council', the local parish-level governing body in Church of England structures

Throughout the interviews and observations, these projects were found to use this diversity of structures to create distinct organisational (and often physical) spaces for themselves. These new spaces occurred on the previously clearly demarcated boundary between the congregation and the wider community. (The notion of 'the wider community' here can include one or more of the public, other churches, other faith groups, and/or public bodies.) In doing this, these spaces were frequently observed to be breaking down barriers between congregations and the wider community through the formation of new, hybrid forms of activity and spaces.

These boundary-challenging spaces thus became creative spaces in which new relationships could be formed, commonalities of purpose explored, and action taken together. One way in which these spaces achieved this potential was through what one Anglican Diocesan Urban Officer described as "creating a space for encounter".

Within these encounter-spaces, people who act out their faith as unconditional service become accessible to enter into dialogue with others who may come from very different places. The previously clear boundaries which can inhibit interaction become more diffuse, enabling them to be crossed more easily. For example, many Christian community work projects were described and observed to be initially physically co-located with a congregation in parts of the founding church's building. For some churches, this coincided with a redesigning

of the available space to enable the available worship space to be shared with broader community use, or to create additional new space specifically for wider community use. The particular layout, distribution and usage of space was frequently designed to symbolise this hybridity; for example, in demonstrating to those using the building that church was open to everybody, or in giving people choice to access particular spaces designated as religious spaces if they wished to pray or talk about faith. The sheer scope and range of designs observed are hard to convey in text, but the reasons behind each design were frequently explained by referring to theological rationales about the nature of church as respondents understood it. This notion of church hybridity has been explored in much greater theoretical depth by Baker (William Temple Foundation, 2003; Baker, 2007b).

In other buildings, and in partnership organisations, such separate physical space is not always possible or made available, but people may fulfil a similar role by acting as 'boundary-crossers'. For example, a community café in a building which used to be a church hall might not have separate space for private prayer. In these circumstances, a number of clergy referred to the fact that when they visited such spaces

wearing identifiable clothing such as a 'dog-collar'[18], then people regularly took the opportunity to talk with them about faith-related matters.

Respondents described much scope for the community worker to be another 'boundary-crosser' between different groups in Christian community work contexts. However, this role was not seen as being easy, especially when it involved "building bridges" between diverse groups. For the community workers involved, one national denominational respondent described these difficulties in terms of how "bridges are built to be trampled on", and that this is how it can often feel to the workers involved. This same national denominational respondent preferred the notion of community workers as 'boundary walkers', highlighting how these workers have to balance between different constituencies. Another member of staff for a national Christian charity echoed this idea in describing how community workers "walk the line between":

(i) including their faith too visibly in their activities, thus risking isolating wider community participants; and

---

[18] A white band worn particularly by Anglican vicars around their shirt collar instead of a tie, that acts as a symbol of their role.

(ii)   not being seen to include their faith explicitly in their work,

thus receiving criticism from some church-goers who say

"You're supposed to be Christian – where's the Christian bit?".

As a result, this member of staff acknowledged that Christian community workers and those involved in supporting them frequently "get flak from both sides".

This boundary-crossing nature of shared organisational space was not always purely physical – in fact, many of the hybrid forms described by respondents were instead founded on various organisational models of partnership involving shared ownership and/or shared decision-making[19]. In these shared organisational spaces, practical discussions over organisational policy, strategy and action necessarily have to deal with the different perspectives of all stakeholders who have a constitutional entitlement to be involved in the making of these decisions. Examples of these organisations include city-wide faith councils and local community centres being built in spaces originally occupied by church halls. Even when such bodies remain within one particular faith tradition, the creation of various (technically internal and subordinate)

---

[19] Again, for example, see Appendix C for a summary of the different organisations observed during Stage 2; as detailed, several examples of the different governing documents for these organisations were collected during the course of the research

sub-groups within the established organisational structures can create the organisational space for new developments. One particularly important way that these spaces can do this is by linking together previously-isolated potential activists, away from the potentially-stultifying influence of traditional hierarchies and committees. It was often tricky to make a technical (legal) distinction between a founding congregation and some of these emerging groups that were getting involved in community activities as informal associations in their own right. Indeed, it was the formalisation of such informal arrangements into new distinct organisations which often occasioned support from the infrastructure bodies[20].

---

[20] For example, in 2004, the infrastructure agency studied in stage 2 of the research was involved in organisational development work with 26 organisations based on its monitoring systems, of which 15 were Christian and 3 were multi-faith. This was out of 69 organisations provided with mentoring support in total, of which 38 were Christian and 10 multi-faith respectively. This means that organisational development work was involved in just under 38% of organisations supported by this infrastructure organisation in total, and involved in just over 39% of Christian organisations provided with mentoring support. These figures would increase if multi-faith projects including Christian input were also included.

5.3 Changing Patterns of Organisational Governance and Ownership

The basis of these organisational spaces is articulated and to some degree fixed formally in the foundational constitutional documents or terms of reference (if any), and informally in the shared agreement of those involved about the nature of their collective enterprise. However, the complexity of these arrangements is further complicated by the observed tendency of 'projects' to change and adapt in form over time.

In fact, many of the people concerned objected to the use of the term 'project', as they tended to link this term with a particular model of community work that they associated with the state and some voluntary organisations, and against which they wished to contrast their own work. This alternative model associated with the word 'project' was characterised in terms of being short-term, less committed, more bureaucratic and involving more distanced professionalised interventions. However, it is used here to distinguish between 'the organisation' as the legal form of collectivity (which can change into different technical forms and legal statuses at discrete points in the process) and 'the project' as the element of continuing intentioned response to initial stimuli (such as local needs) which remains traceable as a social body, despite the legal changes in organisational form.

In analysing the data collected on such changes, despite the huge diversity of particular areas and needs to which projects were established to respond, there were two broad patterns of project development that were repeatedly described when practitioners were asked about the historical development of their organisation. These patterns were identified from the Stage 1 interview responses[21], informal conversations with representatives from Christian community work projects attending the conferences listed in Appendix A, and the stories and issues described by organisations receiving support from the infrastructure organisation studied during Stage 2, as summarised in Appendix C.

Prevalent Trajectory A: Collapsing Inward

The first of these typical patterns of organisational development was described by a staff member of a national multi-faith infrastructure organisation in the following way:

"It was a [faith community] that... set up a community centre, and a [religious building] side by side, in a very deprived neighbourhood. They regenerated an old building, a derelict

---

[21] Nine out of the sixteen formal interviews conducted during Stage 1 referred to these patterns of organisational development trajectories, initially coded under two separate nodes ('Trajectories and Life Cycle' and 'Secularisation Process').

building, and then, eventually they built a new beautiful building, that was used by the local community. And, they had the community come in, and they had a community worker, who was focussed on building bridges, making the link into everything that was happening in the local area: [Education] schemes, enterprise schemes, and IT training, the usual, all the usual stuff. And they did this in partnership with the local authority, and other organisations. ... But then, the burden of running all this became very heavy, and the burden of applying for funding for all this became very, very heavy. And the people with the vision moved on to other things, and the vision started to falter - the vision of being part of a wide movement for change as well as service to the local community - and it's starting to turn inwards now and concentrate on the needs of its own community. And, as I used the words before, staying within its own comfort zone. ... I use it as a story that repeats itself over and again, I've seen it, I've seen it in a Christian context, I've seen it in other contexts."

This expansion of community-related activities to a particular point before the development collapses and turns back inward was one of the most common trajectories recounted by respondents. In these respondent narratives, the initial impetus to address community needs had led to them "building bridges" (i.e. relationships and connections) with others outside their immediate congregation. These new

relationships had been established with both individual members of the public and with other organisations/public bodies in civil society. However, for reasons which will be explored further below, this change often proved hard to sustain, with the resulting work experiencing difficulties which led to these wider links breaking down.

Prevalent Trajectory B: Divergence Between Project and Founding Congregation/s

This breaking down of the wider links established by congregations through Christian community work projects through the project collapsing inwards was not the only common trajectory frequently recounted by respondents in their narratives. Where the project established enough momentum of its own independent of any founding congregation/s, the project frequently established itself as an independent organisation. Over time, respondents describing this alternate trajectory typically saw this as resulting in a gradual divergence between the community work project and the congregation/s, also breaking many of the links which had previously existed.

One example of this alternative trajectory was described by a sub-regional infrastructure worker in the following way:

> "There is a project I'm involved in .... which started at a time when there was a dynamic vicar (a lot of these things start up when there

is a dynamic vicar) who got a whole load of things going, but then in a sense overstretched both himself and the infrastructure of his congregation, and left with a heck of a lot of unresolved bits which needed sorting. [This] then meant that, if you like, the congregation ... carried on being personally involved in the work, but the organic structure between the church and the work [was broken].... The way everybody survived was by the church carrying on by being what it was, the individuals carried on being involved as they were in the community stuff, but then the community block of work splitting into two different organisations. So although there isn't now an organic link, or rather a structural link, there actually is in terms of the people who are involved."

In some of the projects, this process might be described as one of secularisation, in that by disconnecting from the founding congregations, the Christian element of the project's identity became less important or pronounced. In other cases, the project retained some form of Christian identity, but gradually lost much of their formal connection with and ownership by local church congregations (even if particular individuals might remain involved). In fact, given these dynamics, the issue of what might make a project 'distinctively Christian' turned out to be a major theme, which is discussed in much more detail in Section 5.4 below.

There were, of course, many localised variations to the generic basic patterns outlined above, and it was not entirely inevitable that a

particular Christian community work project would eventually adopt one of these divergent or inward-collapsing trajectories. (Additional examples and alternatives are considered in the course of the discussion below). However, even when individual projects had yet to move fully along one of these trajectories (to become either completely independent, or completely collapsed inwards), an analysis of the forces which contributed to these trajectories proved illuminating in explaining the organisational dynamics affecting Christian community work projects in general.[22]

In analysing respondents' narratives about the development of their project over time, several recurrent factors and forces were found to correlate with changes that led to the breakdown of the hybrid/boundary-crossing character of the community work. These factors and forces were identified through NVIVO nodes for formal

---

[22] For example, the Shaftesbury Society (2002) booklet, 'The Cephas Story: God With Skin On', describes the way that one fairly typical Christian community work project developed over time, especially through continued struggles over maintaining ownership by local churches and other Christian organisations. In the process, it highlights many of these organisational dynamics and tensions affecting such organisations in a detailed and reflective way; the analysis presented here explains such accounts in the broader context by exploring the common themes which contribute to the tensions they experience, which (when unchecked) can cause projects to collapse or lose their connection with the established church.

interviews and through thematic analysis of notes from more informal conversations and the locally-published accounts of project development over time.

Despite an apparently increasing informal awareness amongst respondents of the frequency with which projects were experiencing the trajectories outlined above, the issues these trajectories raise for organisational development have received little attention in the available published literature. Instead, the available published resources collected throughout Stages 1 and 2 of the research (as detailed in Appendices A and C) have instead focused on the subsidiary issues (such as funding and ethos) which form the contributing forces discussed below.

By considering these forces in the context of the different agendas outlined in Chapter 3, the reasons for the prevalence of these trajectories can be explored. In doing this, it should be noted that this collapse or separation is not inevitable, despite the constraints – it is just that the current policy and legal framework, combined with some of the "good practice" guidance available, tends to lead projects down this path, often without them consciously choosing it.

By exploring both the similarities and differences in this trend across the numerous examples encountered, in light of the policy discourses summarised above and the issues as represented by the practitioners and

infrastructure providers, it is possible to propose the following analysis of why this trend was so prevalent. This explanation is based on analysing the dynamic forces affecting these 'projects', and how their interacting roles impact on the organisational geographies and configurations concerned.

Significant Forces Influencing Project Trajectories

The significant forces found to be influencing the project trajectories can be grouped into the following categories:

1. Pragmatic Concerns, Especially Funding and Policy Effects.

With many church-initiated projects beginning where needs were particularly apparent (i.e. usually in poorer areas), activists frequently felt the need to do everything possible to make their project eligible for public funds in the first instance. These public funds are seen to be needed both:

(i)   because the congregation (itself often drawn from the same surrounding poor area) may not be able to afford to do the work without these funds;   *and/or*

(ii)   because the project proposed is seen as an effective way of achieving wider public aims, and hence should be eligible for support from public funds.

The longer-term perils and effects inherent in adopting this approach are well summarised by an infrastructure staff member responsible for the support offered to community workers in one area by a national Christian charity:

> "It depends on the life cycle you know, a lot of these groups find it hard to continue after three years, because the funding is a lot easier to access for the first three years, and very difficult after that. So what we've found is that the ones which are most likely to succeed are ones that either manage to build a committed donor base, so that will either come from a single church or Christians in a neighbourhood who have a real vision for that work and want to see it happen, so will give regularly to it. ... Although we have seen other ones start from a church base, but then, mainly because of the funding they've then got into, have moved from that so that it's quite unrelated to the church what ends up, because it's gone for the funding that's out there, and that's meant it has had to have less of a Christian or church focus."

Funding was thus seen as a major concern throughout the data gathered, not least because of the ways in which short term funding was seen as potentially resulting in 'mission drift' away from a project's initial intentions towards a funder's agenda, whilst temporarily decreasing a

project's dependency on more localised contributors[23]. For example, one local vicar recognised this during a Stage 2 observation in quoting another local vicar as saying "Don't change what you are about for a few bob from the council", thus warning him of the potential change which could result in an organisation's identity as a result.

The practical and policy drivers can also extend beyond such funding concerns to wider awareness of the need to be open to all in response to equal opportunities, or the desire to be acceptable to engage in partnership working with statutory authorities, or the desire to promote cohesion by being open to wider involvement. Interviewees described how new organisations were established in ways that maximise their ability to follow this policy agenda and the short-term public funding available. However, this frequently required organisations to develop faster into more formal and bureaucratic modes of operation, which in turn generated less ownership from local communities and founding church congregations who were less able to participate and less needed in the short term. This had the long term effect of limiting future links

---

[23] As shown in Appendix G, the node for 'funding' was the most frequently occurring node in the full transcripts analysed on NVIVO based on separate passages coded, and joint first in terms of number of documents containing this code. This theme also occurred frequently in the conference discussions and Stage 2 participant observation detailed in Appendices A and C respectively.

back to a potential donor and support base. This was described by the same infrastructure staff member in the following way:

> "[Having] a strong Christian identity … means you can attract quite a large donor base, because people know they are giving to you as a part of mission and the churches, but if you get away from that, then you are relying on funding from wherever you can get it, really, which is quite hard."

Not all infrastructure providers saw this pattern of development, where projects moved away from their initial church roots, as necessarily problematic. Some asked questions such as "Does this matter?", usually responding to their own question with the answer "if the organisation is still being true to its original aims, no", whilst recognising that others may see this as a "sell out", especially if the organisation concerned lost some of its original Christian ethos or character in the process. (Different theological perspectives were influential in determining these different responses as point 3 below begins to explore; this theme is picked up and explored more thoroughly in Section 5.4 through a discussion of different perspectives on the nature of a distinctive Christian ethos or character).

2. Changes in the People Involved Over Time

Many of the projects observed and/or discussed with respondents identified a few key instigators who were responsible for initially starting

the project, often a local minister and/or a few influential activists. The following description of a project centred on one individual is typical of many:

"a project at [another church] - they've got a community facility there that [they've had] for years, and it is very much the vision of one person, rather than the vision of the church as a whole, and she is finding that pretty hard, because she is pretty much on her own with it. She's got together a management committee, but they are quite happy to leave [the one person] to get on and do everything. Because she is not getting an awful lot of support herself, she's not... she's really struggling with things like fundraising, the practical stuff, because it hasn't become... she hasn't got the people alongside her. She's got people on the management committee, but everyday, [it's her responsibility]..."

(Trustee, National Christian Infrastructure Charity)

As projects developed, respondents described how increasing responsibilities had frequently required additional time and support, which often led to staff, volunteers and additional board members being recruited. Depending on how clearly the project has been able to think through and articulate its vision, and the degree to which the new people share in that vision, changes in the character of the project may result from this widening of people involved. These changes in character

were often exacerbated by the shifting legal and organisational requirements resulting from changing legal status. In addition, recent changes in employment law have made it much more difficult to recruit people sharing the same religious views by default[24]. These legal changes are founded on a presumption that discrimination is not allowed unless a genuine occupational requirement in keeping with the ethos of the organisation and the essential characteristics of the post. Often, the organisational changes can be further exacerbated by congregational desires to professionalise projects in order to bring in a paid 'expert'. Reasons given for taking this significant step of employing a first member of staff vary, but typically include bringing in someone who will bring additional skills to address perceived gaps, and/or take the strain of increasingly strenuous responsibilities otherwise undertaken on a voluntary basis. In practice, the employment of a separate member of staff may also function in a way that tries to externalise from the congregation the tensions that these projects may highlight, or even in the hope of resolving them with sufficient time and expertise.

When combined with the policy changes and some "good practice" discourses (see Chapter 6), this can create a crisis of character at the

---

[24] The Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003; see Section 3.3. This aspect is discussed further in Section 5.4.

point when the original instigators move on (especially the ministers) or burn out (especially the volunteers), as the Chief Executive of a sub-regional multi-faith infrastructure organisation was keen to point out:

> "You can set up as many structures and [links] as you like, but if it isn't owned, and if there isn't the will, there will be a difficult period somewhere or other around the corner, usually just after the initiator had left."

Whilst conventional management theory notes the likelihood of such difficult points in organisational development (Adirondack, 2006), infrastructure staff also recognised that much can be done to mitigate their impact with prior planning and support. A common strategy recommended by infrastructure staff was to broaden out involvement by bringing new people on board, as another sub-regional infrastructure support worker described her advice in this situation:

> "I think some of it is saying to everyone 'Have you thought about what you are doing? Don't do it on your own. Get some support. Get some people alongside you.'"

Indeed, many perspectives given on good community development practice highlighted the essential need to take a more patient approach to this activity that develops local ownership of such initiatives, albeit with appropriate leadership and/or support offered during this process. Many respondents saw this alternative approach as resulting in very

different effects. These effects were described by the trustee of a national Christian infrastructure organisation in the following way:

"But I think there is a difference between [the example given at the start of this section] and something like [another project], which came out of a local church, which initially was the vision of one person, but she has got people from the church on side with her, and they have managed to, the whole church has been involved with money, prayer, practical support. ... They've managed to refurbish the house as a drop-in centre, and people have come and helped with the painting, people have asked if there is DIY and building work that needs doing for renovation, and they are now up and running [...], because it has been people from the church who have been there and done that, and got that project running. Which is completely the opposite to the situation that [the first person] is in. I think the local community have seen how everyone is being involved, there is something quite: they can see how community is being modelled in what is being done, that faith is actually... creates a lot of excitement and interest on the estate, helps building relationships between the ... church and the wider community, and people are constantly wanting updates on what was happening, what was going to happen next. It's opened, it's up and running, and the response has been amazing, and it has

actually helped to raise the profile of that project on the estate, and helped people to connect with what they are doing."

But this kind of approach requires involving everyone from the start, and slow patient development not suited to the short-term timescales of independent project management in the current funding climate. Where the shorter-term approach is taken, this can lead to real dilemmas over whether projects should continue or not, especially when such changes leave the project without church support and rapid development in response to funding systems has limited a project's sense of local ownership. One national denominational advisor described these tensions and their advice to a project in this position in the following way:

> "We would advise them that you have lost the support of local churches, and that was what you were set up to do, and really its time to call it a day. Because it was a project that was supposedly the work of several churches, but it had actually lost the support of those churches, so there was nobody in the local community who was saying 'we need to get the funding together for this'. And it had become very much worker-led. And they had done what they could, but couldn't get any more funding for it. And I think the workers were looking to us to support them, really, but we actually said 'you're not... you're no longer what your mission statement says you are, and the churches have moved on to do other things,

so it's time to call it a day. And so I think they felt let down by that."

3. Theological Understandings of Community Work and Changing Views of Church

The theological understandings that motivate and drive individuals and groups to engage in community work cover a broad spectrum. Yet, in the search for commonalities across theological diversity, there has been relatively little systematic research which has sought to investigate the effects that different theological understandings might have on practice. The research findings indicated that there are a number of different theological views about the purpose and rationale of faith-based community work, and that these can have a profound effect on the organisational spaces that emerge. These findings were particularly apparent from analysing the locally-published material collected and the accounts given by practitioners when they endeavoured to explain their work to the researcher.

For example, one common theological rationale that was observed being employed in explanatory discourses by (generally more liberal) Christian community work activists sees community work undertaken by Christians or churches as a "gift" to local communities, reflecting God's grace to all people. Taking such a view, the church's continuing involvement in projects that it has had a role in initiating is immaterial, providing the

project continues to do "good work" in line with their original aims and perhaps provides opportunities in the process for sharing their underlying motivation when asked. Indeed, this view sees it as right and proper that churches and/or individual Christians should have an initiating role and then step back, with no particular concern about whether the resulting organisation retains a specifically Christian focus or ethos. Clearly, this would be a contributory factor to the prevalent separation trajectory described above.

Other theological rationales were much less clear-cut in their effects. Clearly, for some congregations, there was the hope that their involvement in community work would lead to a reinvigoration of church attendance, as the co-ordinator of a national Christian infrastructure body described well:

> "There are quite a lot of church projects that start off where at least some of the people involved with that church will support it in part because they will hope it will lead to extra bums on seats."

However, not all workers or infrastructure staff interviewed saw actively working to achieve this aim as being compatible with their understanding of community work principles or 'good practice'. Particular ethical concerns were expressed about any approach which might take advantage of people's vulnerability to get them to convert or participate in religious worship, with one of the Stage 1 interviewees describing how

she had eventually resigned from a post where she felt she was being asked to do this.[25]

Such tensions were described by interviewees as being exacerbated by a historical theological legacy which tended to polarise evangelism and social action as alternative choices for churches in working out the social aspect of their mission. Other infrastructure respondents saw this polarisation as a false divide, and sought to break down this divide, as the co-ordinator of a national Christian infrastructure body described:

> "It depends what you mean by evangelism... There are plenty of people who I've come across who regard evangelism as an exceptionally wide entity or process would not necessarily require some sort of specific, explicit dogma or even words, but by actions themselves, because people know where you are coming from, [and] would in some way interpret that as an expression of the church in God, and therefore it would seem to me to be as evangelistic actions. But I suppose I would say, as a Christian, is it

---

[25] These concerns were reflected in the NVIVO node 'Taking Advantage of Vulnerability and Conditionality', which was one of only four specific types of bad practice cited by Stage 1 interviewees. The other three were projects failing due to the dynamics highlighted in this chapter, a tendency for Christian community work projects to be poor at offering support and complying with employment law with their staff, and duplication of efforts through failure to work with others.

possible to perform a non-evangelistic action, really? I mean, I don't think it is."

In doing this, an Anglican diocesan respondent drew consciously on the Biblical metaphor of Christians being the 'leaven' to indicate that it was less important if the community activity was organisationally Christian than having Christians involved in a range of community activities, particularly in rural areas:

"I did a piece of research on members of the churches' engagement with other bits of their community, whether that was the WI [Women's Institute], the Parish Council or any other, and every member of the church either was or has been engaged in that wider community activity, but had very little concept of it as part of their Christian discipleship, which I found very interesting. They just did it, because that was what you did. And it was maybe about duty, it was maybe about interest, it was maybe about not knowing how to say 'no', a whole variety of interests, and I think one of the churches' failings is an understanding of discipleship that participates in wider activities. Which maybe has something to do with things becoming independent, because Christianity (to use one metaphor) is the salt, not the whole thing, but salt or leaven or whatever, and if it's the leaven, the little bit that makes it grow, that's fine."

However, this respondent (whose remit covered both rural and urban areas) felt that this tended to operate differently in urban areas:

> "In urban areas, church needs to be distinctive. It feels a need to do something that is visible, because as individuals they are invisible in urban areas, so doing something corporately has much more significance where we are not known as individuals. I mean, in a rural area, for better or worse, you are known as an individual"

This issue of organisational visibility and collective action by a particular congregation is a significant driver for work based on an individual-church-centred paradigm. Furthermore, the boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the church community has been a dominant factor in the prevailing analysis of much church literature and grey literature analysed, with much debate over how the apparently widening gap between these can be addressed (see, for example, Breen, 1993, for a direct discussion of this debate in relation to young people, youth work and churches). For some, this is purely a matter of attracting people to believe particular creedal statements and become members of the church, moving from 'outside' to 'inside'. This view tends to see God as mainly or solely at work in the world through the church. Community work from this perspective is necessarily "church-centric", as one infrastructure body, the Shaftesbury Society, describes in a publication critiquing this approach (Erskine, 2003).

In contrast, for others, all of these theologies are seen to reflect the paternalistic philanthropy of the past Victorian era, and crucially foreclose the possibility that involvement might change the church itself. Practitioners and infrastructure staff from various local and national projects have begun to try to express the various theological models impacting on their practice (for example, in addition to those cited above, see Ashdown, 2004). These have begun to be supported by more conventionally published texts considering how theology might impact on community work practice theoretically; see, for example, Morisy (1997), and from an American perspective, Wallis (2002) and Perkins (1993). An Anglican diocesan respondent described her understanding of a more integrated theological approach in the following way:

"I think a lot of it is about having a theology of incarnation, that you are the Body of Christ, you are the presence of Christ in the community you serve, however you act that out, and in the experience of acting that out... you've got these two dimensions: the individual, which is where most evangelicals are concerned with, the individual and the individual's relationship with God. And then you've got society and the kind of social Gospel, and traditionally, the more liberals have been down at this end. And what it is is recognising that you can't separate the two. That the individual is part of society, but that society affects the individual,

so it becomes a circular thing. And basically... unless you change society, you're not going to crack the individual, and also it takes an individual to act collectively to bring about long term change. So it's about bringing the [two together]... you know, you can't separate the two, because it's about the Kingdom of God impacting on both, and... unless churches focus on both, then basically you're going to get a lopsided and almost warped view of the Gospel and what the Gospel is about."

This analysis began to suggest that it was necessary to acknowledge and critically explore individual and collective theological rationales in order to understand these dynamics better. As some of the quotes given above begin to illustrate, however, many respondents felt Christian community workers did not always do this. Instead, these workers were encouraged by much of the guidance and policy-related material analysed to suppress or ignore these theological differences in favour of broader concepts and rationales supposedly held in common by the range of state, voluntary and faith actors. The reasons for this are considered in Chapter 6.

At this stage, it is just crucial to note that theological diversity exists and played a significant role in motivating, justifying and shaping

practice at both organisational and individual levels.[26]   It is also
necessary at this stage to note that in practice, the balance of current
theological trends has tended to support the divergent trajectories
outlined because:

(i)   For many of those actively involved in community work, this
        engagement has challenged the rigid notions of faith as
        creedal belief and church membership espoused by the
        establishment. Those involved can then experience personal
        dissonance with others in the congregation, as well as
        becoming the personal and organisational embodiment of the
        changes that many church members find threatening.

(ii)   Those not actively involved in community work have often
        been those who are safeguarding more orthodox theological
        positions and church welfare, as demonstrated for them by
        church attendance at Sunday service and transmitting
        historically-received theological interpretations.   Thus,
        community work for these must be church-centric, or else cast

---

[26] A fuller debate on the impact of different theological rationales will be conducted in
Section 5.4, which explores the impact of diverse theological explanations on attempts
to describe the essential characteristics of organisations having a distinctive Christian
ethos.

off from being a burden that distracts the church from its core role of perpetuating traditional belief.

(iii) In addition to this, community work can embody the perceived threat from outside the church community, as it can lead to the initially uncomfortable experiences that can arise from encountering difference first hand. (e.g. as one community work respondent described in an informal interview, when the young people using the church hall as a result of the community work laugh at others singing hymns and break a window).

There are significant signs of change from this self-destructive historical polarisation in England, with the pressures of declining congregations and underused buildings forcing many churches to reflect and experiment in different ways to develop more integrated models of practice. For example, the established church is engaging in widespread debate about 'new ways of being church' or 'fresh expressions of church' (Bayes, 2004; Church of England Public and Mission Affairs Council, 2004). Some infrastructure bodies have gone further and begun to question both church-centric thinking and project-based competition (Erskine, 2003), drawing on broader theological developments such as Kingdom theology, incarnational theology and liberation theology.

In describing the creative potential of these spaces, one respondent working at a diocesan level in the Church of England argued that it wasn't about rebuilding a previous connection between church and community, because "we are never going to remake the connection. [Christian community work projects] have to enable a bridge to be built that may go somewhere different."

However, in practice, the pattern of change over time for many churches is one of declining congregational capacity that struggles to sustain growing community projects, in the context of historically-limited theologies and professional discourses that impede the development of a more connected rationale and approach. Together, these tendencies frequently lead to a crisis of ownership that can hasten the secularisation of many projects, or else lead to them collapsing inwards again into the congregation from which they originally evolved.

5.4 A Distinctive Contribution and/or Ethos?

The above research findings demonstrate how questions of organisational identity appeared to be increasingly important to many of those involved in this work. These questions centred on the contested notion that faith-based organisations have a 'distinctive ethos' or 'distinctive contribution' when compared to other social actors. But what factors or characteristics comprise this 'distinctive ethos'? And why do some

organisations in this field feel it is so important to lay claim to this ethos and retain it as their organisation develops, whereas others deal with these issues differently? Also, given the observed tendency for such organisations to encounter crises of ownership which can lead to them collapsing inward or separating/secularising, does this matter?

To answer this question, it is necessary to begin to critically analyse the different perspectives on what particular or distinctive contribution Christian faith might bring to individual and organisational practice in this context. What is it that leads people from congregations to be such frequent initiators of these community projects, such that policy-makers remain increasingly keen to tap their 'distinctive contribution' despite the challenges this might present for current conceptions of multiculturalism and cohesion? And why did the data collected show that organisations with a history of faith-related involvement are so keen to demonstrate their 'distinctive ethos'? These questions turned out to have different, but related, answers, which will now be considered in turn.

A Distinctive Contribution?

Many respondents were certainly keen to promote faith-based organisations as making a distinctive contribution to civil society. The rationales given for this contribution being distinctive involved one or more of the following factors, which I will now argue combine to form an

overall rationale. Faith-related community work is potentially able to draw on:

(i)   Religion as a factor motivating individual and corporate social action, grounded in personal and social identity;

(ii) Connections with a community of interest that has an established organisational framework and resources;

(iii) Alternative worldviews (theologies) held by participants, which participants seek to apply into their contemporary practice and which may challenge prevailing approaches or understandings. These were sometimes termed a "prophetic edge".

(iv) The universal long-lasting commitments often manifested by faith groups to particular groups of people and areas, especially to the poorest and most disadvantaged. These are particularly important at a time when there is a building grass-roots critique of short-term project-focused work that frequently changes focus to follow funding opportunities and changing political fads.

These factors were directly generated from the data gathered in the English context, whilst connecting to and building on earlier comparative international work by McGuire (1992), as will now be demonstrated.

(i)   Religion as Motivation, Grounded in Identity

The first of these aspects of 'distinctive contribution' apparent within the findings can be summarised by beginning where this thesis began, with McGuire's (1992:221) explanation of the link between religion and social action as a motivational one, grounded in personal and social identity:

> "Historically, religion has been one of the most important motivations for change, because of its particular effectiveness in uniting people's beliefs with their actions, their ideas with their social lives."

Respondents throughout the research frequently expressed how their faith motivated them to become involved in community activity. This was reflected in the report from one of the conference discussions attended (Humphreys, 2005:6):

> "First and foremost, people's motivation for [community development] comes from their faith values and a desire for seeking justice and working to redress the balance in terms of poverty, isolation and discrimination."

However, many respondents felt that these theological views were often not welcome or even seen as detrimental to building the consensus

required for collective action with others.　As the same report (Humphreys, 2005:6) went on to comment:

> "People from faith groups are sometimes hesitant to talk about their motivation, particularly in a secular environment. Faith does affect what they do, though some people only link faith with proselytising."

These motivations were intimately connected to their theological views, and hence the precise expression of them varied significantly (as will shortly be explored), with a particular tension around the place of evangelism within the work.　As one sub-regional infrastructure worker described the varying motivations:

> "[The motivation] varies depending on what kind of church you are working with.　For some, they want to see the kids saved, and they want bums on pews on a Sunday morning because we haven't got any young people.　But for others, for most churches really, we want to see the needs in the community, we want to respond to it with Christian care and show the love of God."

This same worker advised projects (in what was a fairly typical fudge) to incorporate their faith within their aims as a motivational statement, such as 'motivated by the love of Christ, we aim to...'.　This was seen as being generally acceptable to funders and statutory bodies, because it separated out the aim of the work from any particular theological

rationale by stating that faith had led to them starting the activity, and left the specific impact of faith on the actual continuing work relatively unstated.

As a result, there was a tendency to suppress verbal expression of any reflection on the continuing impact of faith on practice. At best, this facilitated a basic form of communication provided particular community workers were capable of translating between different sets of language when dealing with different parties. One sub-regional Christian infrastructure worker described her role in these circumstances as being one of 'an interpreter':

> "I think with churches and statutory, there is this language thing. I mean, I've seen in these things before where representatives from the churches and representatives from health, professional social services get together, and I've been sat in the middle laughing, and they were like "What's up with you?" and I was like "You are both saying the same thing here. You're just talking in the language of theology and church, you're talking the language of social policy and services. If I just re-interpret what you are saying to them, then they are like 'Oh, yeah! [I understand now!]'."

However, at its worst, this resulted in a schizophrenia where even the notion that they were saying the same thing, albeit in differently-translated ways, broke down. In these latter situations, the identities of

the projects and workers were severely challenged, with profound consequences, as later chapters will discuss in more depth.

Others avoided this by being more strident in promoting their theological motivation in the public sphere, but as this national campaigner respondent acknowledges, this frequently required a lot of explanation to others, and could bring conflict:

> "[Our] aim is the transformation of lives through the power of Christ. That's what motivates us, our Christianity and our faith, the two objectives that spring from that are to see local churches at the hub of their communities, actively engaging with them and serving them and advocacy and lobbying and so forth. And the second aim is to see the public perception of the church held by statutory bodies, other voluntary agencies and other non-Christian faith groups change, to help them to understand exactly who we are and what we stand for."

(ii)   Within a community of interest that has an established organisational framework and resources

The second aspect of faith's arguably distinctive contribution was its ability to connect motivational beliefs, values and attitudes with established communities of interest built around these attributes. Such

communities of interest can bring to the process an established organisational framework, together with substantial resources, whether in terms of physical buildings, financial capital, historical traditions and ideological capacities, networks across wider areas or levels of influence, etc.

This aspect has been well developed in the emerging research literature in this field, not least in that produced by various Christian and multi-faith infrastructure bodies as well as Government departments, as detailed in Chapter 3. Respondents tended to be well aware of at least some of this literature and/or had become adept at making their own arguments of what existing resources they could bring to the community work process.

(iii) A "Prophetic Edge"

The third aspect of distinctiveness which respondents argued faith contributed to community work was its potential to involve alternative worldviews in the form of theologies which participants sought to apply into their contemporary practice. These theologies enabled practitioners to start from an alternative worldview, which in turn enabled them to be critically reflective of current norms in their engagement with broader society. These alternative worldviews or theologies were sometimes termed a "prophetic edge", making connections with the Biblical tradition of prophets who frequently

challenged prevailing attitudes or values by claiming to speak from God. Drawing on this Biblical tradition, this prophetic element to their work frequently involved challenging prevailing understandings of how (for example) poor people should be treated by society, people should respond, and even majority moral opinion. Such alternative worldviews are more than just isolated ideas, but amount to a systematic approach to life which can challenge (amongst other things) prevailing approaches or understandings of community work.

Seeking to apply their understanding of Christian principles into contemporary personal, ethical and political settings had potentially had profound consequences for their practice. However, practitioners' ability to think through how to apply their beliefs into practice, and articulate the resulting reasoning, required practitioners to develop theologically.

McGuire (1992:221) summarises the potential within this function well by referring to religion as "a profoundly revolutionary force, holding out a vision of how things might or ought to be".

The critical component of this voice held the potential to be both critical in the academic sense of thinking for themselves rather than just adopting mass political or moral opinion, and critical in terms of its resulting potential critique of the status quo. However, this critical element of faith groups' contribution was perhaps in practice less

welcome than their perceived contribution of resources and a sense of community to the prevailing political agenda.

Examples given by respondents included vicars involved in community work starting to ask critical questions about 'why' some areas were so deprived that they needed regenerating or 'why' people were homeless in the first place. As one speaker at one of the conferences attended can be paraphrased as saying:

> "There is only so long that you can keep pulling people who are drowning out of the river before you go upstream to find out why they keep falling in."

(iv) Long-term commitment to the most disadvantaged

Despite the current decline in attendance at worship services, 'faith communities' were widely recognised in policy, infrastructure and local discourses as long-standing institutions that have stuck with declining areas or disadvantaged groups long after most other organisations have withdrawn.

The character of this commitment is also noticeable, frequently encompassing a universalism of commitment underpinned by theological understandings of the value of every person, and the need to demonstrate solidarity with the poorest and most oppressed.

This long-term commitment to people was frequently seen by Christian practitioners as contrasting with the short-term 'problem' focus of much Government funded, project centred work. The latter was seen as facing a building grass-roots critique because of its tendency to change focus just to follow funding opportunities and changing political fads.

This commitment was structurally underpinned by the universal commitments inherent in the parish system adopted by many denominations. Such structures frequently involved systems of cross-subsidy from more wealthy parishes, enabling churches in less wealthy areas to continue operating long after they would otherwise have become economically unviable.

However, there was concern amongst many of the infrastructure and project worker staff interviewed that faith-based responses to poverty were being encouraged by policy and 'good practice' guidelines to adopt a more short-term, professionalised project approach, despite the growing grassroots critique of this type of work.

It is all these attributes together, rather than any one individually, which collectively comprise the distinctive contribution which faith communities were argued to make. Individually, other social actors and organisations might meet one or more of these criteria, but few if any

were seen as combining all of these factors together.[27] Whilst not all respondents mentioned all of these criteria, there was no active contestation of any of them in terms of contributing to faith-related community work making a distinctive contribution to civil society. However, the same could not be said about whether Christian community work projects might have a 'distinctive ethos', as we will now consider.

A Distinctive Ethos?

In addition to talking about 'making a distinctive contribution', respondents also frequently referred to their work as demonstrating a 'distinctive ethos'. However, when it came to trying to identify this 'distinctive ethos' (a specific or unique spirit or attitude in common) amongst the organisations and practitioners studied, this was a much

---

[27] For example, one might argue that holding to any set of explicit, coherent beliefs and values involving a set of moral precepts expressed in general terms (such as a political rather than religious worldview) might equally provide such a distinct worldview. However, few if any other sets of belief might also be argued to provide the same extent of identity-grounded motivation combined with established organisational frameworks and resources distributed locally with a long-term commitment to the most disadvantaged.

more difficult task. The organisations studied varied immensely in many regards, but there were two main perspectives which categorised the responses given when participants throughout Stages 1 and 2 of the research were asked to explain what might make Christian community work organisations or practice distinctive. Unless otherwise stated, quotations given in this section are from Stage 1 infrastructure respondents.

EXPLANATION 1: The Presence of Particular Aims, Motivators or Values

The first of these perspectives was the presence of particular aims, motivators or values (usually arising from particular theological understandings) in their practice. For some participants, responses to the question 'What is distinctive?' started with the motives and intentions of those involved:

> "The intention of those who are running it, managing it, and who are wanting to work in a particular group who have as their motivation ... the wider Christian picture of all people living together."

> "What's different is your motivation and what drives you, and your values may be somewhat different as well. So, when you get in a

tight spot, as you do with the work, your values may inform you to take a slightly different position than somebody who doesn't have those values. But, there are good secular practitioners who have those characteristics as well."

For others, their view of distinctiveness comprised of values, ideas, and personal beliefs brought through personal integrity into their practice:

"Who are you, what do you stand for, what do you really believe in, what is the non-negotiable that you need to be able to see almost as the DNA for everything that you do."

"All the faiths have ascribed this enormous value to people, and to people in relationships, and that is what they all have in common, and it is from that, and from an idea and a concept of service to other people, whichever faith they happen to be, that this engagement with community work and regeneration comes. A desire to work for and get involved, for the community to be a better place for people to live in."

For still others, the distinctiveness of faith-based practice was about its tendency to include particular elements of "holistic" practice which were not usually found elsewhere. Examples of the additional elements incorporated in these descriptions of "holistic" practice included aspects of emotional and spiritual development, both individually in personal/social development and collectively through taking seriously

Page 246

issues such as the impact of hope or despair on regeneration processes. One participant described this additional element that makes faith-based practice distinctive in terms of spirituality:

> "I would say a spiritual person is someone who, above all, seems to be aware of what they are feeling, and embraces that, ... and is through that process able to transform everyone and continue to be themselves. It has to do with strength within yourself and the ability to accept difference in other people, and I personally think that kind of God-centredness is very necessary for that process, ... I mean, we call it spirituality, they might not believe in God, but I don't know what other word you can use for it other than spirituality."

Finally, some practitioners saw the distinctiveness of their "holism" as being due to their ability to bring a transcendental or 'eternity' perspective to processes, setting their work in a different context and meaning framework, including elements such as hope and a 'radical pessimism' arising from an awareness of human sinfulness.

AMBIVALENCE AND RESERVATIONS

As some of the quotes above illustrate, not all respondents were convinced on reflection that their explanation of distinctiveness was

sufficient to differentiate themselves from practitioners operating from alternative secular or faith-based perspectives. Whilst the vast majority of stakeholders interviewed were keen to promote the potential of their particular contribution, many also expressed some reservations about exactly how distinctive their particular contribution actually was:

> "I do think faith has an investment in sustaining looking at life from a value point of view, … and that is something very positive that they need to contribute to society and keep on the agenda. I don't think, however, that faiths in general, or any one in particular, have got a monopoly on why folks can and indeed should be better than they can be, and its right to engage with them and help that process. But … I do sometimes encounter, especially in mainstream faiths, … just a bit of sometimes unwitting arrogance that seems to suggest that faiths are the sole holders of the value-informed way of seeing life, which impedes then faiths from learning from others.
> … Where faith can be brought down is in the very implementation of the values that they preach."

This leads us into the murkier waters of whether these factors underpinning the stated approach of faith-based organisations actually make a difference in terms of their day-to-day practice. On reflection, many respondents recognised that faith may not always add any of the additional elements cited above, and indeed in some circumstances can work against them. For example, one practitioner who had previously

seen faith-based practice as uniquely recognising emotions, on reflection then recognised that religion is often (mis-)used to suppress emotions:

"You can use religion for anything you like, I suppose. I think of it like a framework in which you can explore your spiritual life, and the problem with religion is that too often it is not used for that purpose. Too often it is used to provide a safe haven from the world; sometimes it is necessary for people who have very traumatic lives, but it is often not helpful for people to take that extreme approach, and that affects, I think, our spiritual practice, and what we find truly important in our lives."

Others drew on their experience in related fields (such as education) to show their ambivalence:

"My background is in teaching, and I can't for the life of me work out the difference between a church school and a good primary school. I cannot say what it is, and yet a church school will say that there is. And the school that my children went to, and I was chair of the governors at a non-church school, and they are the warm, caring people they are supposed to be, but completely non-Christian and the headmaster of the school was Jewish, and he talked more about spirituality than when they went to a Christian secondary school, because he helped them engage with the other. Yes, that there was something bigger than them, which is the

beginning of spirituality. So, yes, that whole thing about ethos is a very tricky one, isn't it. And my own debate with it goes on, and if I don't think it can be said about schools, how can I think it can be said about that project?"

This leads us beyond just the presence of values or intentions themselves, to the second of the reasons why faith-based practice might be considered distinctive – the ways in which faith-based practitioners and organisations endeavour to achieve their aims, the actual way they put their values, motives and aims into practice.

EXPLANATION 2: The Ways in which Aims are Achieved

Respondents gave several different explanations for how individual and organisational aims, values and motives might be distinctively operationalised. For some practitioners and organisations, the distinctive characteristic was seen as being willing to give of themselves, ad infinitum, for no anticipated return beyond that miraculously and graciously granted by God, in contrast to the prevailing expectations inherent in conventional business-planning approaches. For others, a reliance on God and an awareness of a relationship with God was the distinctive contribution of faith-based practice, often including the need to remember the importance of prayer. As one council worker was quoted as saying:

"I hate to say it, ... but there is something about the fact that [the community project worker] prayed for everybody, and they knew she prayed for us, that changed the outfit."

For still others, the particular contribution of faith was the way that it brought with it different critical interpretations of current jargon-based concepts and contemporary understandings. One example of this was given by an infrastructure respondent explaining his critical understanding of the term 'empowerment' widely used by practitioners and policy-makers:

"As a Christian, I believe that I can't empower anyone. It is actually only the Spirit of God that empowers, and it is only when we try to cooperate with that Spirit, the Enabler, that we fully develop the power that we need to do our work. ... I think if you think your job is to empower people, you can get into all kinds of problems actually. ... And it is that kind of insight, [that] we don't believe that man is an individual [island], we don't believe that humanity can solve its own problems [which makes the difference]."

For other projects, faith was thought to bring about more egalitarian relationships within projects, although this was often recognised as also being true of many voluntary organisations.

Some of the more controversial elements which some felt provided the elusive distinctiveness were those requiring continued involvement of practising Christians in the project. Some projects felt that an important characteristic which retained their distinctiveness was only employing Christian staff or volunteers to do some or all of the work (e.g. Faithworks' academies), whereas others were more concerned with getting 'the best' staff irrespective of their beliefs.

Finally, for some projects, the distinctively Christian element was the retention of Christians in control of the ownership or management of a project, or at least a Christian presence on the board. However, others felt they demonstrated the distinctiveness of Christian faith-based work by churches 'giving the project away' to the local community.

Not all of the proposed distinctive characteristics were necessarily positive. Aspects of potential distinctiveness seen by respondents as more negative included, in some areas, an increased tendency to operate in isolation from other organisations and agencies engaged in similar work (also see Lawrence, 2004 for related survey data and Blake-Lobb, 2006 for qualitative case study data which supports this perspective). Potential explanations for this included a lack of awareness of others involved in this work, but also included a reluctance to engage with others in order to preserve their own distinctiveness.

Another potentially 'distinctive' factor argued by some respondents was a perceived increased tendency for religious organisations to adopt paternalistic philanthropic attitudes to helping others, in contrast with contemporary community development practice which focuses more on self-help/empowerment-based approaches, although others could point to examples of both religious and secular projects adopting both practices.

One final, potentially 'distinctive' factor mentioned by some respondents, usually in a negative light, was the increased likelihood of encountering particular moral judgements seen by some as discriminatory or prejudiced, but reinforced in this context with theological 'rationales'. For example, one infrastructure worker described the people involved in one project at an Anglican church as "freaking out" over the issue of whether or not it could employ homosexuals, resulting in a "painful" debate.

As if all of these diverse and often seemingly contradictory explanations of distinctiveness weren't complex enough, we haven't yet mentioned perhaps the most controversial element of potential distinctiveness proposed – that of a unique potential role for evangelism in Christian faith-based community work. In trying to explore the diverse perspectives offered as to whether evangelism had a place, and if so what place, in Christian community work, increasingly, the many ways of doing and understanding evangelism became focus of this debate.

Certainly, the underlying distinctiveness that all the responses actually seemed to have in common was a connection with church and/or Christians. This created an opportunity for the public (whether as workers, volunteers or those participating in the projects offered) to come into informal contact with people who are known as Christians. This could then result in people entering (if they wished) into a voluntary discussion or exploration of faith. However, for some projects and practitioners, this was largely discouraged, in case it amounted to 'taking advantage' of clients' vulnerability. For others, creating this potential for discussion was seen as the core purpose of the engagement, and even (in a small minority, frowned upon by other Christian practitioners) sometimes made compulsory – an example of the latter being a project for homeless people which required participation in a worship service before serving food ("singing for your supper").

Why is Distinctiveness Seen as So Important?

Having outlined the wide range of potential explanations of distinctiveness offered, it is equally important to consider why Christian practitioners and projects were so keen to demonstrate they could offer something particular through a faith-based approach to community work. Here again, several explanations can be detected within the data collected, which together form an environment where a clear organisational identity has become a necessary defining characteristic.

1. The Effect of Employment Legislation

An initial explanation is the growing anecdotal awareness of a secularising trend amongst initiatives that begin as Christian faith-based projects (as explored earlier in this thesis). In this context, Christian initiators sometimes wish to retain ownership in order to safeguard their original vision. This was seen in the reluctance of some projects to adopt wider local representation on management structures, typically quoted as voicing their fears by asking "What if they take it over?".

Having already noted that some Christian organisations felt it important to employ people who held the same faith, employment legislation was also identified as a significant factor requiring organisations to show they were distinctive. In particular, recent legal changes in the form of the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 have made it increasingly necessary to define and document the religious ethos of an organisation in order to comply with employment law if they wish to use religion as a factor in deciding who to employ (ACAS, 2005).

This created a recurrent dilemma for initiatives that had begun from a faith-related motivation or inspiration. Many of these had been set up with the intention of bridging a gap between congregation and wider community, and often welcomed the involvement of a wide range of people, with the resulting space enabling different people to mingle and work together on shared goals. In this, the documented case of the

Shaftesbury Centre in Eastbourne (The Shaftesbury Society, 2003a:22) is fairly typical:

> "Christian and non-Christian volunteers work together, whilst ensuring that the Christian core values are not diminished. This has been achieved by working with a core of Christian volunteers from local churches and then integrating these people with other helpers from across the Shinewater estate. As one volunteer says 'The Christian ethos doesn't make me feel uncomfortable. It is not a barrier to me. No one's ever tried to preach to me, people accept me as I am'"

However, to enable this space to be maintained, respondents seemed to highlight the importance of having staff who were familiar with the founding congregations, their structures, theologies and practices, in order to maintain the linkage without creating an exclusive place. Without this "organic link", as one infrastructure staff member described it, the milestone of project development when staff first become employed frequently marked further divergence from the founding faith-motivated actors.

In response to this, many infrastructure agencies have become involved in developing guidelines, training modules, providing support, etc. to help projects document their ethos. For example, one infrastructure agency had produced guidance to enable "Christian organisations

understand their ethos, translate it into practice, from the point of view of employment law, anti-discriminatory legislation, making sure they are working well within the standards and recommendations of government policy".

For many, this is not without some reservations, as staff struggle in this area as with other areas of distinctiveness to articulate their perspectives in ways that comply with the law. These reservations were expressed by the same infrastructure staff member in the following way:

> "Anti-discriminatory legislation in the United Kingdom is good for gender, is good for sexuality, is good for ethnicity, is good for age, but is not good for religious understanding; it lags way behind, because there is no vocabulary that enunciates how ethos, religious belief and practice are married together."

2. The Effect of Funding Practices

In addition to the law, potential funding bodies were also seen as a significant factor in encouraging a clearly-articulated identity. The complex dynamics affecting most community and voluntary sector organisations in the current policy climate all impact in a recognisable way on Christian organisations involved in community work. However, the issue of funding in the contemporary context crystallised the issues of distinctiveness and organisational ethos in a particular way. Because most funders look to invest in organisations that can demonstrate

compliance with their aims, values and goals in their own particular culture and language, the ethos of an organisation (as demonstrated in its written constitutional aims, policies, etc.) is often seen as the acid test of what an organisation is about and whether or not it will be funded. Those organisations which could demonstrate they were clearly evangelical in character may not often be accepted as eligible for state funding, but were more highly attractive to funding from religious trusts and churches. On the contrary, those organisations which demonstrated a commitment solely to social action with limited theological or church-related language or aims can appeal to state and secular funders, but can seem tangential to the central mission of religious funder stakeholders. The vast majority of these funding bodies require local organisations to be clear about their identity and stance, whether they wish to access money from religious or secular sources. Not fitting clearly into either a 'religious' or 'secular' type was frequently observed as creating difficulties for organisations which felt they bridged these two categories, with both religious and secular funders often reluctant to identify sufficiently with them to invest in their work.

The net result can be a precarious and ultimately unsustainable existence for organisations that try to blend both sets of expectations, even when they are successful in creating intermediary spaces, because they struggle to identify closely enough with any one particular stakeholder. This can affect not just community-level organisations, but

also the continued existence of the infrastructure organisations trying to promote work that bridges these different concerns.

3. Other Contributing Factors

As the professional discourses from other related sectors begin to penetrate into the language of faith-based practice, often through "capacity-building" skills and organisational development support, faith-related organisations have also increasingly begun to relate their work to management theories outlining standard organisational concerns. These perspectives have often highlighted the need to start with a clear idea of who they are, where they are coming from and where they are intending to go; identifying their particular stakeholders and market segments, and being able to market themselves specifically to each in specifically-selected language and terms suited to that particular audience. In this language and framework, one might see the 'distinctiveness' debate as being the result of faith-related organisations trying to articulate their 'unique selling point' in a crowded and diverse market of potential welfare providers.

On a much broader level, faith-based organisations and practitioners have been required to prove their positive credentials and articulate a more positive identity due to changing social and political trends. In particular, global events have combined to put religious identity increasingly in the spotlight, and even under threat, due to declining

attendance at religious worship and the frequent tendency for secular society to portray religion as a source of irrationality, fundamentalism and terrorism.

Finally, one more proactive basis for faith-based organisations and practitioners trying to articulate an alternative, distinctive identity has been in an effort to address the perceived deficiencies in current legislative, practice, and policy responses. This research uncovered several examples of infrastructure bodies endeavouring to strategically influence emerging frameworks in ways that they felt better reflected the understanding of faith-based practitioners. This included the application of human rights legislation and involvement in national hubs of expertise and national occupational standards, aiming to proactively shape these frameworks to better reflect insights and practices from faith-related practitioners and organisations.

In this context, 'distinctiveness discourses' were deployed to evoke the respect required of different cultures in the current multiculturalist social framework, and hence counter or re-interpret prevailing understandings.

Based on this interpretation, discourses of distinctiveness might be understood primarily as strategies to justify those selected areas of practice where particular faith-based practitioners' or organisations'

practices differ from the normative 'standard' which other more powerful stakeholders were trying to set.

The Implications of this Analysis of Distinctiveness

Given the varied and often contradictory nature of these findings, is there anything left that can truly be considered distinctive about this entire faith-based sector, in all its diversity?

Based on this analysis of the research findings, it is possible to answer this question in the affirmative, but in a different way to any one individual explanation proposed by respondents: What is left as distinctive is the implicit or explicit shaping of individual identities and practice (and to varying degrees the practice of the groups they participate in) by the theological beliefs and understandings of those engaging in it, and how these interact with those around them[28].

---

[28] This conclusion leaves aside any comment on whether or not God is the source of the "distinctiveness"; even for Christian respondents, the theological understandings of where and how God works were highly varied. Many did not consider God to be active only in those people and organisations claiming to be Christian, and neither did respondents necessarily consider all organisations that called themselves 'Christian' to be engaged in God's work or in relationship with God. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that many of the practitioners interviewed felt that God was active in their (and others') work, and for some, it was this that they felt made their practice distinctive.

The beliefs that people hold, and the belief systems (theologies) which underpin these, form comprehensive worldviews which necessarily affect individual practitioners' outlooks on life, themselves and their work. This extends beyond just being a motivator to what one respondent described above as being the "DNA for everything that you do". The exact content and structure of the underlying belief systems varies along with their application in particular settings, and hence so does the effect of these belief systems on practice. Nevertheless, as the DNA analogy alludes to, these belief systems are intimately entwined with the individual and social identities of those who hold them. This makes isolating a particular trait as the 'distinctive ethos' problematic, because this ethos is as much about how different aspects of the work fit together, and the value/belief system which underpins this holistic integration. However, this effect is not always explicit or well thought through - as with classical psychological theories on identity, there are inherited or hidden aspects of ourselves of which we are unaware (Luft and Ingram, 1955).

Changing social contexts and controversial political or religious issues provide an impetus to critically examine the application of theological perspectives to the current context. However, at the same time, these contexts and issues challenge the identities of those involved, because these identities are caught up in particular existing expressions and applications of values and beliefs. This has a direct impact on later

chapters, which explore these emerging issues of identity and the effects of theologies on practice in much more depth.

For now, it is sufficient to note that generating increased reflection on these issues (as we have begun to do in this chapter) helps to improve awareness of the impact of faith on practice, thus informing future practice. Yet, in the current social and political climate, reflection on the precise impact of faith on contemporary practice is the element of this work which is least likely to come under critical scrutiny. This is because critical scrutiny presents problems for the organisational interests involved. For government and partner bodies, the impact of faith on practice is the area where most difference and controversy can be found which might challenge this policy field. Organisations with specific theological roots have less reason to engage with different views about the impact of faith on practice at all, and more reason to continue to uncritically perpetuate the received understanding in order to retain their core supporters. Even infrastructure bodies with the broadest bases can find it easier to neglect critical scrutiny of these issues, as doing so can help avoid controversial issues and maintain delicate coalitions. Issues of central importance to organisational survival (such as funding and compliance with employment law) exacerbate these dynamics. These dynamics have in turn led to several strategies being employed to manage rather than reflect on these differences, as Chapter 6 will shortly explore.

5.5 Conclusion – Why Do These Organisational-Level Findings Matter?

This chapter has presented findings based on an analysis of the research data collected which have led to four main conclusions. Firstly, Christian community work creates creative hybrid spaces at the boundaries of congregations, other organisations and the public. Secondly, these spaces are distinctive because they are shaped by the interaction between theological beliefs, identities and practice. Thirdly, these spaces are tenuous in the current context because of the impact of various forces and agendas that also contributed to their creation, leading to such spaces frequently collapsing inwards or separating outwards. Finally, as we will go on to explore in more depth in subsequent chapters, active reflection on these matters is frequently discouraged by the context.

At this stage, however, it is possible to draw two preliminary conclusions about the effects of the current context on the organisational spaces created by Christian community work:

(i) That separating projects which begin as faith-based initiatives from their theological and organisational roots can remove any particular distinctiveness or additionalities that faith-based work is argued to provide.

(ii)   Moreover, such a separation also removes the creative spaces within which boundaries between the communities of interest that are particular faith-centred congregations and broader society become permeable. These shared spaces are crucial in enabling different people to engage with and learn from each other, not least through developing meaningful dialogue between the different sub-cultures involved. These spaces require both:

a. the encounter with the unknown other that is central to any real learning process.

b. the ability to reflect critically on such an encounter in order to learn from it, and not just either retreat into the 'comfort zones' of traditionalist identity, stereotypes and practice, nor be completely assimilated and lose the identity and learning which you can bring to that encounter.

Where Christian community work projects successfully create such spaces, they enable a process of learning, engagement and bridge-building which has resulted in advantages both:

(i)   For churches themselves, as they finds ways to reconnect with wider society and hence regenerate themselves, through stimulating their own organisational learning and theological

reflection, not least in applying their faith to contemporary life.[29]

(ii)   For wider society, as people of faith find ways of connecting with people from different persuasions, and building relationships with them which hold within them the potential to live peacefully and with integrity in a multi-cultural democratic society.

In a society so rankled by the divisions argued to be brought about by religion, should not a properly-multicultural society be encouraging the development of such spaces, and encouraging faith-based groups to be outward- rather than inward-looking? The difficulty is that policy-makers seem to want the creative potential of faith communities without the critical prophetic edge that comes with it – a notion which this analysis demonstrates is both impossible and counter-productive. Instead, with people for whom religion forms a crucial part of their identity forming a valuable part of society's diversity, an alternative approach is needed that encourages these groups to engage critically, holistically and with integrity with the communities around them.

---

[29] This connects with various theories of organisational learning, not least those of Senge (1990) and Argyris and Schön (1978). An example of this from the research is detailed in Chapter 8.

However, the effect of co-opting "faith communities" into a pragmatically-grounded compromise without fully taking into account their nature is that their involvement in community work can fail to realise its full perceived potential from the perspective of any of the stakeholders involved. This is because a pragmatically-grounded compromise is insufficient to facilitate the difficult process of learning and reflection taking into account the diverse identities involved which such spaces need if they are to be sustainable. This effectively neuters much of the potential of the creative hybrid spaces created by Christian community work.

If faith-based practice is to achieve any of the diverse expectations which are driving its currently resurgent popularity, the factors shaping the identity and belief systems of the individuals and groups involved will need more attention from practitioners, policy-makers and researchers. This brings the particular theological rationales influencing the practice of individuals and organisations out into the public sphere, thus opening up both policy and faith to public engagement and scrutiny, and enabling links that may bridge difference between faiths and/or other worldviews to be sought through dialogue. To do this would open up 'faith communities' to public scrutiny of the coherence of their beliefs and actions, internally and with the world around them, in pursuit of truth, whilst also opening up policy to critical scrutiny from these alternate worldviews. If undertaken based on the foundation of

dialogue outlined here, this alternative may hold the potential for a much more productive policy approach.

This argument is not intended to be read as a carte-blanche manifesto for the inclusion of faith in any and all ways in practice. Clearly, there are engagements between religious groups and other individuals or social groups that in no way meet the 'ground rules' which make the dialogue indicated possible – in these circumstances, there are real issues requiring debate, especially concerning what should and should not be eligible for public funding. Considering the precise nature of these issues, and their relationship to competing truth claims and normative practice ideals, is the subject of the subsequent chapters. Neither is it an argument for Christian faith-based community work to be just a tool to perpetuate traditional 'Sunday worship service'-focused forms of church, or even traditional formulations and expressions of belief. Instead, it is the recognition that this encounter, entered into with integrity by all concerned, could lead to what Donovan (2003:xiii) refers to as having "the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before".

Donovan's work in the African mission context led him in to conclude that the church's involvement in just running welfare agencies was obscuring their focus on this critical engagement in sharing and learning. This research into Christian community work in the very different contemporary English context indicates that whilst some would subscribe

to this view, others are finding that it can offer an opportunity (if used in particular ways) to stimulate creative learning, engagement and bridge-building. Unfortunately, this chapter has shown how the current English context encourages a more neutered approach that severely limits the creative potential and sustainability of the hybrid spaces which Christian community work can create.

Chapter 6: Constructing 'Good Practice': Contested Strategies for Dealing with Difference

6.1 Introduction

This chapter draws on the research data from across the three stages of the research to characterise and critically analyse three strategies found to be commonly deployed to deal with the increasing awareness of diversity within and between the agendas and discourses highlighted in previous chapters. Each of these strategies is shown to constitute different attempts being variously tried by the diverse 'stakeholders' involved to construct a shared normative basis for assessing how 'good' any particular practice might be. Examples from the research are used to illustrate these strategies, together with the issues, problems, tensions and dilemmas which result from using them as a normative basis from which to build an understanding of 'good practice' for Christian community workers. Community work is shown to be a highly contested arena of practice even in its more secular manifestations, to which the faith dimension adds further complexity. Because of this degree of contestation, and the nature of the relationships and groups involved in this work, the evidence from the research builds on earlier theory to show how community work practice cannot be 'neutral', but requires reflection on the purposes and aims of this practice as well as the methods. For Christian practitioners, this includes making space for

theological reflection which is absent from current approaches. As a result, this analysis highlights the need for an alternative theoretical basis for understanding what 'good practice' might be in this context.

6.2 The Missing Perspective – A Practitioner Point of View

Earlier chapters of this thesis have focused on the organisational effects of the diverse agendas and forces acting on Christian community work. However, within these discussions, the research discovered an additional perspective, frequently neglected in the institutionally-focused discourses of government and church denominations. This is the point of view of groups of activists and individual practitioners (especially volunteers), many of whom are looking to faith-based community work to help them develop a framework for understanding how their deeply-held values and beliefs relate to collective social action in this context. In attempting to do this, however, they encounter the complexity of these different agendas, demands and expectations from the different 'stakeholders' outlined in previous chapters. These agendas are encountered through both practitioners' own direct experiences of Christian community work and through the various presentations, writings, guides and training available in this field.

Practitioners' difficulties in understanding and applying the various theoretical and practical materials available can be exacerbated by confusions generated from their often unacknowledged diverse

theoretical and theological underpinnings. As we began to highlight in Chapter 3, community work has historically been influenced by a range of theoretical approaches, having incorporated roots from a number of models, traditions and disciplines into contemporary practices (Popple, 1995; Gilchrist, 2003). Analyses of contemporary faith-related community work have highlighted how this work incorporates multiple policy rationales (e.g. Lowndes and Chapman, 2005) and different theological traditions (Ashdown, 2004).

This crowded theoretical and theological scene has become further confused by debates in professional fields such as youth work which have been historically coupled with community work[30]. In youth work, for example, various commentators consider the tensions between secular and faith-based practice to be so great that they debate whether they even constitute the same profession, or whether they should be separated out into (secular) youth work and (sacred) youth ministry (e.g. Pugh, 1999). Even the place of informal education, regarded by many leading theorists as the proper foundation for community and youth work practice (Jeffs and Smith, 1996), is questioned as to its appropriateness for application in faith-based practice (Ellis, 1990).

---

[30] Chapter 7 provides a more detailed example of this, as in studying the perceived place of faith in some examples of professional education and development, the university-based programme is a joint course in community and youth work.

More recent studies have begun to highlight the resulting dilemmas experienced by individual community workers (Smith, 2000a; Farnell, Furbey et al, 2003) and youth workers (Ahmed, Banks and Duce, 2007) in faith-related contexts. When combined with the multiple, high-profile agendas driving the different organisational and policy interests highlighted in earlier chapters, the individual perspective of the practitioner in responding to these agendas and trying to work out how best to practice is frequently lost.

As this chapter will show, the research for this thesis revealed multiple examples of situations where this contested nature of practice led to practitioners experiencing complex dilemmas as they endeavour to decide how they should best work in this context. Because of the contested nature of community work practice, practitioners have often been left to integrate this complex range of expectations and understandings with their own practice, frequently with little or no training or support, in an environment where they are acutely aware of the personal pressures and increasingly anecdotally-aware of structural issues relating to such work. By setting these dilemmas in the context of the broader agendas and issues outlined in earlier chapters, significant problems are identified with current attempts to construct a normative basis for this work which can cope with this diversity.

6.3 Existing Responses to Practice Diversity (and Their Limitations)

As the earlier chapters have demonstrated, faith-based community work is being promoted by a broad range of possible stakeholders as a way to address a diverse range of concerns. However, as the importance of this work has moved up the political and media agenda, the resulting renewal of interest and research has increasingly highlighted the extent and diversity of this work. Given the diversity of expectations and understandings affecting this work, this chapter begins to consider how this diversity of expectations and understandings is being managed by those advocating faith-based community work as a potential way of addressing them.

As awareness of the diversity of practice has grown, and with it awareness of a whole range of contentious and contested areas where practice differs substantially, the research found evidence of a range of approaches which have been applied by influential stakeholders in an attempt to construct a normative basis for this work.

Within this context, the frequent use of the term 'good practice' by many of those involved in contexts relating to practice diversity quickly drew the researcher's attention for the reasons outlined in Chapters 1 and 4. This term was found to be widely employed throughout the practitioner-focused literature and in the observations conducted, and

generated diverse responses when its usage was queried within these observations and other interviews. The research found that the term "good practice" was being used widely to reinforce certain practices and discourage others, and guide practitioners in evaluating how well they are working. The deployment of this term frequently inspired uncritical acceptance of the advice being offered in some situations, yet received critical questioning in others, but had yet to be subjected to a rigorous analysis. Hence, this chapter explores this usage in more depth by analysing how the diversity of expectations and understandings impacting on faith-based community work were being managed by those influential stakeholders who advocated 'good practice' in this work as a way of integrating these different agendas and resolving these dilemmas.

Through analysing the data gathered throughout the three stages of the research process, particularly Stages 1 and 2, three distinct strategies were identified as being commonly deployed by policy makers and infrastructure agencies (and commonly repeated by practitioners) in order to deal with this diversity in practice:

1. "Whatever is appropriate" to particular local circumstances, based on local discretion.

2. Finding "common ground" through terminology to transcend other differences.

3. Standardisation masquerading as professionalisation.

Each of these strategies has its own issues and problems when it is employed as a normative basis on which to build an understanding of 'good practice', as will now be considered.

1. "Whatever is Appropriate" (Based on Local Discretion)

Initially, recommendations by policy makers and researchers to those dealing with diverse faith-based practice focused on advocating whatever was 'appropriate' to individual circumstances. For example, in terms of the highly-contested issue of providing state funding for faith-based community work, the Local Government Association (2002:18) guidance recognised that:

> "A frequent source of misunderstanding between local authorities and faith communities has been uncertainty about whether public funding can appropriately be made available for faith group activities."

This guidance then goes on to highlight the differences between funding worship or propagation activities and social action, indicating the general consensus that the former should not be eligible for public funding, whereas the latter might. However, it then recognises that there are situations where discretionary judgements about appropriateness may need to be made by local officials. Examples of

these situations include whether to provide public funding for internal capacity building support/structures within a particular faith and whether to impose conditions (such as requiring an organisational structure that is demonstrably independent of the worshipping congregation) on groups receiving public funds. It also recognises that these factors have led to a dependency on discretionary decisions which have been differently interpreted in different local situations, requiring local authorities to weigh potential benefits and risks before making a decision. In many cases, this can mean that faith groups are more dependent on particular officer or councillor decisions than other comparable local community groups. Examples of this cited by the report are in situations where faith groups apply to local councils for discretionary rate relief[31] or for statutory funding where they choose not to apply to alternative Lottery sources because of moral, ethical or religious reasons. Depending on the situation, there may be differing

---

[31] At the time of writing (December 2007), charities, including those exempt or excepted from registration with the Charity Commission (currently including many major Christian denominations) and those not required to register (e.g. those groups with charitable purposes under a certain turnover threshold), are entitled to 80% mandatory relief from business rates for their premises. They can apply for discretionary relief on the remaining 20%. New independent organisations with faith group involvement which are not registered charities but have a turnover over the threshold would have to apply for discretionary relief on the whole amount.

degrees of discretion which officers or elected officials are able to exercise, ranging from applying fairly clear rules in particular situations to devising appropriate responses to new situations based on their broad understandings of basic principles.

However, this discretion-based approach has come under increasing strain when applied to contested areas, such as how 'equal opportunities' principles should be applied in the context of faith-based community work, if at all. As awareness of the full diversity of faith-based community work has grown, so too has the corresponding awareness that the interpretations and discretionary judgements made by public officials can differ significantly in different places and at different times. This approach is highly problematic when combined with an increasing political recognition of the possibility of institutional forms of discrimination, not least when also connected to ethnic identity (Macpherson, 1999).

Such difficulties are further exacerbated by the confusion discussed in Section 3.3 over what particular understanding of community cohesion and multiculturalism should underpin British public policy, particularly in terms of whether to assimilate or value difference in the public sphere (Modood, 1997b; Cantle, 2005). These difficulties continue to abound,

as illustrated by vigorous debates observed throughout the research[32] between practitioners, between experts and in the popular press.

One particular area where these more abstract debates were observed to have a particular impact was in the contested attempts to apply current understandings of "equal opportunities" principles to practice in this field. Practitioners were observed throughout the research to be engaging in highly contested debates on this topic. For example, three of the diverse questions which practitioners were observed to be debating on multiple occasions throughout the research illustrate some of the difficulties being encountered[33]. These can be summarised as follows:

(i)   Does insisting that faith-based organisations must adopt standard equal opportunities statements which commit them to equal rights irrespective of gender, sexuality, etc.:

a. serve to make these organisations more inclusive in their practices?   *and/or*

---

[32] Examples of these debates were observed in the practitioner-oriented conferences listed in Appendix A, the academic conferences listed in Appendix F, and on numerous occasions throughout the fieldwork listed in Appendices C and D.

[33] Further examples of difficulties raised by practitioners' understandings of 'equal opportunities' are considered in Chapter 7.

b. ensure that certain faith-based groups are themselves institutionally disadvantaged and discriminated against in engaging with public policy and/or receiving state support, because these statements are frequently seen as failing to reflect aspects of their theologies?

(ii) Even if such standard equal opportunities statements are accepted by faith-based organisations in terms of service delivery, to what extent should faith-based organisations be able to insist on particular personal characteristics (such as holding particular beliefs or behaving in certain ways) in deciding on whom to employ or allow to volunteer in this context? This issue has been brought into sharp relief by the recent Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 and Equality Act 2006, which legislate on these matters, but contain certain allowances and exemptions building on tests such as 'genuine occupational requirements' and organisational 'ethos'. However, the interpretation of many aspects of these acts remains substantially untested in the courts.

(iii) How should specific religions or denominations understand and interpret their own scriptures and traditions in light of alternate hermeneutics and interpretations of how such beliefs relate to their cultural contexts? A particularly visible public

example of this question is the debate over homosexuality causing great difficulties for the Anglican communion.

At present, even where existing research literature has recognised these debates, they have yet to be resolved. This is because there can be no neutral perspective on these issues; any resolution depends on the perspective of those involved. From the perspective of faith-based projects, the problem is that "Standard equal opportunities statements do not appropriately address the needs of faith-based community projects" (Smith, 2000a:iv). As a result of this, Smith concludes that "a number of equal opportunity issues and discriminatory practices remain problematic for faith communities, and are particularly challenging for evangelical Christian communities" (p.6). For policy-makers, on the other hand, the problem is frequently phrased in different terms, which Farnell et al (2003:44) summarise in the question "How flexible can liberal society be when faced with [religious] inflexibility?". This shows how even the terms of the debate themselves become highly contested where "good practice" over equal opportunities and diversity issues are concerned.[34]

---

[34] The discussion in Chapter 7 covers practitioner dilemmas over applications of equal opportunities highlighted by one particular part of the research process in more detail.

These issues were frequently apparent in the data from this research where faith communities' drew on their own alternative ideological and value-based traditions and discourses. These alternative discourses were frequently observed as enabling faith-based practitioners to bring alternative terms, meanings and frameworks to bear on debates over issues such as equality, human rights and social justice. For example, personal research journal reflections on a recent conference which brought together faith-based community workers from a range of different religious backgrounds together with a secular national community development agency[35] noted that:

> "different faith [and secular] interpretations were most apparent on the values of social justice and self determination, with various theological issues arising from this. For example, self determination of human sexuality in its broadest sense, and its relationship with issues of morality, prove particularly challenging issues (especially in the context of youth work, and young people discovering and determining their own identity at a point of transition)."

---

[35] The 'Faith in Community Development Seminar', 31st March 2005, as detailed in Appendix A.

Evangelism (speaking of one's own faith) and proselytisation (attempting to convert others to your particular faith) were similarly highly-contested issues, evoking strong feelings and impassioned arguments for and against their inclusion in 'good practice'[36]. In such debates, arguments for personal and organisational integrity (that their practices should reflect their stated beliefs) were frequently observed to vie with equally-impassioned rationales that practice should be based on an ostensibly-detached impartiality in order to avoid taking advantage of the vulnerability of people in need and/or imposing specific judgements about social issues on particular people. Questions also abounded over whether, if it can take on these forms, it must always inherently do so, or whether there are alternative ways of working which embody both personal integrity and respect for others.

To complicate matters further, differing moral or theological stances on such issues were frequently caught up in professional debates on how best to apply even the same stance to a particular practice situation. Thus, for example, styles of community work that differed in the degree of directiveness inherent in their chosen approach (from more directive

---

[36] These are reflected, for example, in the NVIVO node 'Proselytisation', which was the fourth most frequent theme occurring in the Stage 1 data (see Appendix G), and which was categorised as one example of the contested purposes of community development when organising these nodes into hierarchical 'trees'.

'consultancy-style expert advice and support' through to more non-directive facilitation that allows people to do their own research and make their own individual or collective decisions) can also clearly differ in how they apply even the same personal stance in practice.

A practical example of this from the research process was in the different ways that practitioners dealt with contested issues such as contraception and abortion in their practice[37]. Even if practitioners take a similar stance on the morality of these issues, there remain choices and different views over how best to apply these moral values in a particular situation. When faced with questions over these issues, they face a range of practice options that include:

(i)   Refusing to even discuss such matters due to their moral position;

(ii)   Providing a response limited to particular options based on a preconceived moral framework;

---

[37] For example, this was reflected through being mentioned by four of the formal interviewees (two of which were with Stage 1 interviewees, and two of which were student interviewees from Stage 3), as well as in a presentation made by a practitioner at the Inter-Cultural Communication and Leadership School residential during the Stage 2 fieldwork.

(iii)   Enabling people to explore all potential options, however unpalatable they may be to the worker concerned.

Whichever option or moral position they choose, practitioners also frequently differ over how much of their personal value perspective they choose to share as part of such a discussion, and how best to do this (if at all). This in turn raises issues of personal/professional boundaries, and the impact of values on professional practice. Whilst these issues have received some research attention in literature on general professional ethics relating to social professions (see, for example, Banks, 2004 and 2006), there has been little work which has sought to explore these issues in relation to faith-based community work. These issues had become further confused by some practitioners with their wish to apply 'non-directive' forms of practice (of which Batten was a principal proponent; see Lovell, 2007).

In particular, as we have noted, community work in Christian contexts is not always carried out by people who would see themselves (or want to see themselves) as 'professionals'.   Indeed, whether Christian community work should be 'professional' or not, and what this might mean, was highly contested amongst research respondents (see the discussion of the third strategy, 'standardisation masquerading as professionalisation', below). The students interviewed had typically decided to study in order to become more professional in the sense of "knowing how to do things properly", as one student put it. The

infrastructure agencies were typically keen to portray a similar image of Christian or faith-based community work projects being competent in the activities they undertook. In this context, an approach to managing practice diversity which left all possible approaches to conducting practice to individual discretion, however divergent individual practice decisions might be from prevailing professional/political norms, no longer seemed tenable.

When applying these debates in the support given by infrastructure bodies to various groups for their own organisational development, additional questions were raised over whether infrastructure workers should challenge any practices which they considered wrong or oppressive. In this situation, not challenging practices which might be considered potentially oppressive or unprofessional was potentially the safer option. This enabled the infrastructure organisation to remain 'politically correct' by avoiding offending groups who held different value positions, not to mention respecting the different historical experiences and contexts of each individual project through practising in a non-directive way. However, at the same time, this held the potential of clashing with the various professionalised notions of the purposes of this practice, not least the anti-oppressive practice commitments within secular statements of community work values and principles (Paulo, 2003). In such statements, the commitment to challenge oppressive

practices is a common feature, even if there is room for difference in terms of how best to go about doing this.

Whilst there is not space to directly address all of these contentious issues here, even this short outline demonstrates that any approach to practice which relies solely on appeals to 'whatever is appropriate' leaves many issues unresolved, not least being who decides on what is appropriate when contested issues and practice decisions are at stake. Practitioners frequently view such ethical or value judgements as at the heart of their ability to be a 'good' practitioner in this context.

What can be observed, however, is that all that an approach dependent solely on local interpretations of 'appropriateness' does is to pass the buck in terms of dealing with these contentious policy and practice issues onto local practitioners without providing them with any theoretical basis for making these decisions. In the process, it contributes to a tendency for important practitioner issues and debates to be fudged or suppressed in the interests of not highlighting the extent of diversity in this practice. This is 'necessary' because highlighting the differences in practice would in turn further highlight the deeper conceptual and structural issues relating to community cohesion/multiculturalism, community work theory and multiple agency/policy agendas of which practice differences are a product. However, the impact of this sort of approach has increasingly proved to be problematic and even self-destructive for all those involved, as the

differing expectations for faith-based community work continue to build without these contentious issues being resolved (as the organisational analysis in Chapter 5 highlights).

2. Finding Common Ground Through Terminology That Transcends Difference

Alternative, if related, approaches to managing these differences have been based on attempts to find common ground between different faith groups or between faith groups and other groups/government. Christian community work was observed throughout the research to play a prominent role in generating opportunities for inter-faith dialogue and in generating opportunities for Christians to work together with others with different beliefs (including atheists and agnostics) on shared initiatives. Such initiatives frequently involved trying to find terminology that might enable people to transcend other differences. This has frequently taken on the form of a search for a language of common values underlying divergent practices, such as (for example) a common recognition of the "value of every human life".

An indicative example of this approach to managing difference was observed in the response of a city-wide faith forum to the discovery that there was a local connection with the London underground bombings on 7th July 2005. In this difficult situation, the forum was able to issue a common statement to a national television news programme expressing

their solidarity with each other. In this statement, the forum emphasised their shared condemnation of any theological justification for this sort of violent act, based on the values held in common by all the members of faiths present. The same forum then explored practical actions they could take together to demonstrate these shared values.

This kind of approach clearly meets the policy objectives of helping parts of different faith 'communities' find common ground with each other, and sometimes with practitioners in secular agencies. For example, early in the research, the Home Office's (2004) website confidently declared:

> "The Home Office recognises that there are certain core values which unite all the faith communities, and indeed people of good will who do not hold religious beliefs. These were celebrated at the Shared Act of Reflection and Commitment by the Faith Communities of the UK, held in the houses of Parliament on 3 January 2000 to greet the new Millennium. The values are:
>
> Community
>
> Personal Integrity
>
> A Sense of Right and Wrong
>
> Learning, Wisdom and Love of Truth

Care and Compassion

Justice and Peace

Respect for One Another and for the Earth and Its Creatures

These values form the basis for all productive inter faith activity and for co-operation by all the faith communities in addressing issues of social exclusion, civil renewal and community cohesion."

The finding of common ground in terms of values on which shared community work might take place clearly enables much positive collaboration and interaction to take place. This articulation of shared values (echoed in different ways by other major church denominations) had combined during the research period to lead to particular interest for Christian community work in this approach.[38]

For individual practitioners, who have to apply these broadly-worded statements of values and principles to particular practice situations, this shared language may be helpful in making initial connections with practitioners from other perspectives. To the extent that different

___

[38] For example, 6 of the conferences attended during Stage 1 of the research were explicitly multi-faith in their scope, and all of the others included specific sessions or discussions on engagement or partnership working within a multi-cultural or multi-faith (including secular/faith) context.

languages and terms represent the same principles or concepts, this can be helpful, requiring simply a process of agreeing common terms having undertaken an initial process of translation. For example, as noted earlier, one infrastructure worker referred to her role as often being one of "interpreter" between representatives from churches and secular statutory agencies:

"I mean, I've been in these things before where representatives from the churches and representatives from health, professional social services get together, and I've been sat in the middle laughing, and they were like 'What's up with you?' and I was like 'You are both saying the same thing here. You're just talking in the language of theology and church, you're talking the language of social policy and services'. If I just re-interpret what you are saying to them, then they are like 'Oh, yeah!'."

However, not all differences observed during the participant observation research lent themselves to being resolved through simply translating or finding a shallow agreement over common terms in order to make initial connections between participants. In other situations, this approach risked obscuring and preventing a deeper understanding of similarities and differences between cultures, theological traditions and their effects on practice from being developed. As such, the approach showed substantial limitations as a way of understanding and responding

to diversity within everyday practice choices and dilemmas made by Christian community workers.

Firstly, by focusing only on finding terms to define what is shared in common, the language adopted can work to hide (rather than resolve or explore) differences, limiting the depth of the understanding developed. As the Inter-Faith Consultative Group of the Archbishops' Council (Inter Faith Consultative Group, 2005:14) notes in an Anglican report published around this time:

> "'Faith' language can tend towards commonalities and away from difference and whilst this may not always be a bad thing, it can lead to a reduced religious literacy and an inappropriate tendency to hold together concepts, actions and groups which are not alike."

In turn, this can affect the depth of relationships and learning able to be developed from such encounters, since such relationships are only concerned with the aspects shared in common, and not also those which are different.

Secondly, only selected people may be involved in phrasing the statements of values and beliefs held 'in common'. Contrary to the political terminology of 'faith communities', which implies a homogenous grouping, faith groups can include a range of diverse interests and perspectives. Those people directly involved in shaping such statements will necessarily be part rather than the whole of a faith

'community', and may phrase the resulting statements to hegemonically support their own interests. Moreover, in doing so, they obscure the selective nature of these interests by applying a universalising language.

An example of this process in action was the same city-wide faith forum highlighted above discussing how representatives from different religions should work together to promote "family values" and "the value of every human life", as this was perceived to be something that all participants would have in common. However, during the ensuing discussion, it became clear that the phrase "family values" was being used by some (but not all in the group) as a symbolic code to apply a universalising assumption that all faiths would pursue a conservative agenda on controversial issues such as abortion, the role of women, sexuality, etc. This sort of approach fails to recognise that the theological arguments assumed to be universally held are actually contested – for example, feminist theologians have critiqued the patriarchal nature of the church as an institution and its role in ideologically reinforcing women's oppression (Sawyer, 1996). To give another example, there are also growing Islamic critiques of gender-biased traditional patriarchal jurisprudence and cultural interpretations, with these critiques being based on honouring Qur'anic injunctions regarding equality (Sardar and Malik, 2004:160-162).

Hence, as well as finding common ground, this shared language can clearly be used as a means to deny or hide difference, in the interests of

using the chosen terms as a means to co-opt a group into one particular agenda. Critically, this agenda can often be adopted without reflecting on the inclusive and exclusive implications of using particular terms, or reflecting on other potential understandings within faith traditions. This process can often be exacerbated by the tendency for many such forums and groups to fail to be representative or inclusive of those groups (young people, women, minority groups, etc.) who are most likely to be disadvantaged by this sort of hegemonic use of language. This approach also ignores a realistic understanding of the sociological history of the use and abuse of religion as a tool for both emancipation and oppression/social control (McGuire, 1992).

An approach focusing on language-based similarities built on abstracted concepts as negotiated in these forums fails to take into account that the reasons for particular people attending such groups may also vary. Forums for inter-faith interaction were frequently observed to attract more liberal or open-minded participants, not those necessarily most prone to resist such interaction. Those attending did not necessarily have any recognised leadership role or support from the group that they were ostensibly representing, and may even be seeking alternative authoritative status having been denied this within a particular faith congregation. In practice, these tendencies can limit the usefulness of such forums in drawing together all those holding different views, and

undermine the potential of any carefully-worded settlement to carry the support of the wider 'faith community'.

Hence, a solely-language-based approach to addressing difference is of limited use in resolving the dilemmas resulting from unresolved theoretical tensions remaining beneath this language, if all the language does is 'paper over the cracks'. For example, in the faith forum situation above, this theoretical perspective on managing difference does little to answer practitioner questions concerning what 'good practice' might be in this situation. In particular, should Christian community workers (such as the one from the infrastructure agency attending to support this group) challenge, question or support the attempted use of language in this way? In supporting this usage of language, the worker may help such groups to realise their own agenda in a non-directive manner, but challenging it may help realise the anti-oppressive value base which many community workers claim as the root of their profession.

Such debates can frequently extend beyond the particular intervention of the community worker to contest even the aim of the activity of community work itself. At the heart of the research were recurrent debates about the nature and purpose of the church, the nature of truth, and whether evangelism and community work could and should be compatible with each other (and if so, how this could happen). We will return to consider these issues in later chapters; but first, one final

identified approach to constructing a normative basis for community work practice needs to be considered.

3. Standardisation Masquerading as Professionalisation

The final approach identified for managing diversity in practice was an attempt to develop a shared set of standards to guide how practice should be conducted. The resulting standards frequently claimed to draw on the language, discourse and experience of professional community work in applying theory and a defined set of values to this work.

On the face of it, this approach has the potential to overcome the issues identified with the first two approaches by specifying and articulating a particular normative value- and process-base for practice. However, for Christian community work in the current social and political context, there remain a number of issues with this approach. These issues centre around the extent to which professionalism might involve a standardisation and/or bureaucratisation of what has been shown to be such a diverse range of community work activities, and if so, on what basis.

By setting the observed activity in the context of the earlier literature review in Chapters 2 and 3, these issues can be further explored. As we have already noted, community work as a category of activity is a relatively young and contested concept in the English context, with

complex roots ranging from charitable philanthropy through to self-help empowerment and more radical community organising approaches. Such activity has had highly ambivalent relationships with the question of whether it should be standardised and/or professionalised, given its diverse roots in primarily voluntary activities. Many of these activities have taken place outside the state's direct control, and even sometimes in opposition to it by campaigning for change. In addition, many theorists (see, for example, Illich et al, 1977) and those involved in community work, as activists and/or beneficiaries, have articulated various critiques of other professionals for being primarily self-interested in professionalising their work and objectifying their 'clients'. These research findings were no exception, with various respondents questioning whether professionalisation was necessarily a good thing, including one diocesan infrastructure respondent who noted that:

> "The worst community workers... I have seen have been qualified professionals, which says something to me."

Another sub-regional infrastructure respondent working for a Christian charity had produced a paper highlighting typical issues that he came across when dealing with Christian community work projects. One of the issues he cited for discussion was a manager who was quoted as saying:

> "Although our worker is good at her job I feel she has made the project too 'professional'. Everything seems to be about having the

right policies rather than getting alongside people and caring for them. People are much more reluctant to volunteer now. The project has lost its heart."

Indeed, in many respects, respondents saw professionalisation as being intimately entwined with the problematic project development trajectories outlined in Chapter 5. For example, one national Christian community work infrastructure respondent described these connections in the following way:

"It seems to me, the more professional a group becomes, partly the difference because you pay staff who've got the right qualifications, and they may not be Christian, and they may not wish to publicly identify with that motivation, and the need to meet regulation which [gives specific requirements], particularly in the field of family work and childcare, [means] it is one which doesn't lend itself easily to a distinct Christian ethos in that way.

This quote also highlights the current policy trends outlined in the literature review which have constrained much professional autonomy and localised reflection through New Public Management techniques involving managerialism and centralised target-driven approaches (Webb, 2006). Amongst the principal central obsessions of these approaches are concerns with limiting risk and liability, together with a desire to set targets centrally and measure performance against them

systematically. In order to deliver this, a centralised agenda has arisen concerned with determining 'what works' and then training workers across a broad range of fields in the requisite skills deemed required. These workers increasingly work within multiple outsourced agencies and partnerships rather than directly for the state, in a bid to introduce quasi-market forces into social welfare service delivery.

The research findings included various reflections of these trends. For example, public officials referred to the Government's role in terms of service delivery as being about 'steering, not rowing', capturing the intention to direct activity at a distance whilst others nearer the ground put the effort in. However, this attempt at centralised direction had extended beyond making recommendations towards 'good practice', or even only funding projects seen to be engaging in 'good practice'. In addition, the research data included evidence of attempts by Government and influential infrastructure agencies to define exclusively which activities should be included in a particular category such as 'community work', what skills are needed for each activity and how these activities should be carried out. One of the most influential mechanisms for doing this referred to by respondents throughout the research involved the newly-consolidated 'National Occupational Standards for Community Development Work' (Paulo, 2003).

The Sector Skills Development Agency (Sector Skills Development Agency, 2008)[39] describes National Occupational Standards in the following way:

"National Occupational Standards (NOS) define the competences which apply to job roles or occupations in the form of statements of performance, knowledge and the evidence required to confirm competence. They cover the key activities undertaken within the occupation in question under all the circumstances the job holder is likely to encounter.

They can be used to:

- describe good practice in particular areas of work

- set out a statement of competence which bring together the skills, knowledge and understanding necessary to do the work

- provide managers with a tool for a wide variety of workforce management and quality control

- offer a framework for training and development

---

[39] At the time of writing (January 2008), the Sector Skills Development Agency is the umbrella body now responsible for supporting the 25 various Sector Skills Councils. These Sector Skills Councils are employer-led bodies licensed by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills for reducing skills gaps/shortages, improving performance/productivity, and increasing skills development/learning opportunities. See http://www.ssda.org.uk/default.aspx?page=2 .

- form the basis of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) and Vocationally Related Qualifications (VRQs)."

National Occupational Standards centre on a 'functional analysis' designed to exhaustively identify the key competences, roles and skills required by those undertaking a particular job. In the case of community work, statements of principles, purposes and values had also been included with the standards, but these made no explicit mention of faith or religion (although there are some related references, as we will shortly discuss). This leaves those community workers who state their faith as their primary motivation for being involved in community work with difficulties in easily relating to such standards, or even in deciding whether they should relate to standards which ignore such an important basis for their work.

During the research, many of the infrastructure bodies observed and/or interviewed referred to these standards and were exploring how their work might relate to them (see, for example, the conference reports produced by CCWA, 2003; Humphreys, 2005; Community Development Exchange et al, 2005). Accepting these standards was seen as an easy way to gain credibility with secular partners, as well as find an agreed basis of common language and approaches from which talk about their work (especially as practitioners' own understandings of faith frequently led them to broadly share the stated value base). As a result, some

infrastructure agencies were willing to accept and even actively promote these National Occupational Standards as *the* standard for good practice in Christian community work. In the process, these infrastructure agencies could use this opportunity to demonstrate the compatibility of Christian community work with Government aims and secular practice, in order to open up additional avenues for funding, recognition and support. Thus, in some cases, these standards had been incorporated directly into an official organisational perspective on the purpose of this work.

Perhaps the most important example of this was the practice of the United Reformed Church, which was the one major denomination that officially recognised community work as a vocation equal in value but different in role to that of an ordained minsters. In a step which was itself seen as "good practice" by many of the infrastructure respondents, this denomination had chosen to adopt the secular National Occupational Standards as the basis of their community work role (United Reformed Church, 2005). In order to apply these standards to their own context, this denomination has produced its own agreement signed by churches, community workers, and denominational officials when setting up church-related community work projects. In this agreement, termed a 'Church-Related Community Work Covenant' (United Reformed Church,

2006)[40], the denomination sets out the aims and value base of community work using definitive, universalising statements such as:

> "*All* community work aims to tackle the causes of prejudice and discrimination and to build local structures where power is justly shared; we work to fight discrimination against others (whether because of race, nationality, belief, sex, sexual orientation, disability, age, class, or any other reason) within ourselves, our organisations and wider society."

> (United Reformed Church, 2006:2, italics mine)

Such statements had a mixed relationship with the findings from the research conducted for this thesis. Clearly, all the community work observed did not necessarily share this aim, with the impact of religious beliefs on community work equally capable of being cited as justification for discriminatory behaviour or attitudes (as in previously cited examples). If such universalising statements are seen as aspirational in nature, however, their attempts to define the nature of community work practice and aims in terms which support particular stakeholders' positions on the contested issues become clear. By defining community work in this way, those involved can help build alliances with others

---

[40] A copy of this document is included as Appendix H.

holding similar views within and outside the faith community concerned.
As such, these definitional debates play a broader hegemonic role in
setting those practices and values seen as contributing towards
oppression and social control against more emancipatory tendencies
even within religious traditions and denominational structures. The
difficulty is that, in denying that alternative purposes or expectations for
community work exist, the potential to reflect on the impact of these
diverse purposes and expectations as held by others is lost.[41]

The increase in policy interest in faith-related community work has
heightened these limitations by encouraging other infrastructure
organisations to collaborate with government concerns by constructing
one particular standardised version of practice and attempting to set this
up as the only one worthy of being labelled 'professional', 'high quality',
or 'good practice'. One example of this type of approach is the

---

[41] This should not be read as a critique directed particularly at the United Reformed
Church, whose practice in this regard is positively ground-breaking, and whose
covenant clearly recognises some of the conflicts which may need to be managed as a
result of supporting community work within church settings. In essence, what the URC
is doing within this document is defining what community work means for them, which
is necessary for any organisation wishing to undertake such work. However, the
widespread use of such statements in relation to practice in general obscures the fact
that some community work can have very different aims, including those which can be
to the detriment of those whom this definition claims to help.

'Faithworks Charter' (Faithworks, 2005), which aims to create "a benchmark of professionalism and excellence" that all organisations can be measured against, endeavouring to make compliance with the benchmark the measure of how good any particular practice might be.[42] This charter aims to incorporate "best practice" in policies founded on principles of outcome measurement, "not imposing our faith on others", and equality of access to the services provided by faith groups, whilst implementing employment policies which enable faith-based community work organisations to "preserve our distinctive ethos". Adherence to this position is then regulated through means of membership of a "social movement" to support their precise articulation of these positions, which requires member organisations to sign an agreement to uphold these standards in order to get free access to tools and resources which would otherwise prove more costly when purchased individually.

Increasingly, however, practitioners and those infrastructure bodies listening closest to practitioners were observed to be beginning to highlight issues with these 'broad-brush', standardised approaches. During the research, practitioners frequently recounted experience of how applying standardised practice requirements in their local context had resulted in counter-productive effects.

---

[42] A copy of this Charter is included as Appendix I.

For example, during one of the observed conferences, one church representative used a workshop to share their experience of running a project for vulnerable and isolated younger mothers on an urban housing estate. After successfully establishing relationships with these mothers and supporting them over several months, a scandal in the news alerted the church to the possibility that some volunteers might be potential abusers. This led them to be aware that a standardised expectation of 'good practice' within such projects was that all volunteers should have had their police records checked before volunteering with vulnerable groups. Concerned that they had not originally followed this standard, the church immediately suspended the work until police checks on all volunteers could be received. The net result of such an action was that the relationships carefully established over several months were lost, and the successful opportunity to provide support which had been established was decimated and could not be later resurrected. An action ultimately taken to prevent these vulnerable young women from being exposed to harm actually resulted in them losing support which could have helped them respond to the potentially harmful situations they continued to face in their everyday lives. In collectively reflecting on these experiences within the conference workshop, participants identified the problem in this situation as being one of a limited operationalisation of principles into practice. The valid principle of the need to 'protect vulnerable people from potential abuse' had been

operationalised by the church elders into 'all volunteers must have their criminal records checked before they can be allowed to be involved in community work'. In this situation, one particular bureaucratic and limited procedure (i.e. a check of criminal records which, by its nature, only reveals abusers who have been caught/convicted) had become 'the standard' for 'ensuring' that the principle was achieved. As a result, compliance with the operationalised 'standard' can become the measure of whether a principle has been effectively applied. One problem with such an approach is that it lends itself to the creation of longer and longer lists of requirements which can ultimately obscure the principles on which they are based. The loss of this link to the originating principles leaves practitioners unable to reflect on how different principles and values might be applied and balanced in any particular local situation. When such lists of 'standards' become the basis for dealing with practice diversity, by requiring all practice to confirm to one particular operationalisation, the scope for discussing different principles becomes strictly limited. In particular, the opportunity to learn from reflecting on different principles and different concepts other than those implied by the terms used in the words of the standard is lost. Significantly, this includes leaving little room for theological reflection or concepts which might offer insight different to that of contemporary professionalised discourses and approaches. These difficulties become even more complex in the 'hybrid' spaces of

Christian community work when additional issues of project/church relationship and individual/organisational identity are involved, as the following example from the Stage 2 participant observation illustrates. A non-Christian, unqualified lay worker, who was running a community centre originally established by a church and now run 'at arms-length', was observed during the course of one short session with a support body to be asking highly pertinent questions about the application of standardised bureaucratic quasi-professionalism in her context. These questions could be summarised as follows:

- When running a short holiday club, at what point does a parent who attends with their child become a volunteer and hence require their criminal record to be checked, a full induction and risk-assessments carried out, etc. etc., ? When they first offer to help do a task such as making a cup of tea? (And should the rules applied be different if the person who offers is under 18?)

- Should the worker then turn down this offer of help (contrary to her broader aim to get parents and young people involved and empowered in running the group in the long term) just to avoid risk?

- If she insists that older members of the church congregation go through these processes before helping, won't she put off many of those who would otherwise consider getting involved and helping

build bridges with the congregation? If so, how can she overcome their resistance to these standardised formal processes, which potentially includes a perceived suspicion of their intentions for getting involved associated with criminal checks and/or perceived criticism of their competence in preparing food and drink associated with risk assessments and food hygiene courses? And how does insisting on these measures affect her role as a relatively newly appointed worker and relationships with the congregation in that setting, especially when these members of the congregation see themselves as having carried out these activities well for many years without such processes having been in place?

- What outcome measures could truly capture the holistic nature of their approach?

- Does having a written policy really change practice, or is it just to 'cover people's backs' in case of a problem, and either way, how does she know and keep up to date with everything the law has to say about her work?

- What should her project's relationship be with the founding church? Should this affect the aims and ethos of the work, and if so, how? Should the project establish itself as a separate

organisation, and if so, what would allay the vicar's concerns that the project might become "a cuckoo in the nest"?

- What should she do when some members of the church want to hold a carol service with the parent and toddler group in their usual session?

- What should she say if members of the church see her work as not contributing adequately to the growth and development of the church itself?

- How does and should her personal identity as a person who isn't a member of the sponsoring faith community affect her work? Does this, and/or should this, affect the nature of the project?

Whilst several of these issues share aspects in common with the broader voluntary sector, many of the available resources in this context seem primarily focused on fitting local practice in to a broader national model of 'competence' rather than asking critical questions about the role of faith-based practice in this context. As such, in attempting to define and enforce one particular approach to practice, these resources frequently seemed at odds with the diversity of local interpretations of issues and their related practice decisions, which were frequently highly resistant to standardisation.

Indeed, much of the observed work of more locally-grounded infrastructure agencies was found to be involved in helping local projects and practitioners find ways to reflect on what wider experience and resources might contribute to their practice, and how they might apply this learning in their context. However, such an approach differs substantially from a standardised approach which just insists that particular 'standards' are applied in every context, without supporting practitioners in reflecting on what principles they embody and how these principles might relate to other principles (including theological ones). Having undertaken this reflection, new and more creative possibilities were sometimes able to be found; for example, one diocesan infrastructure respondent repeatedly emphasised the importance of "project-specific solutions" for this reason. In other situations, such as the dilemmas over whether 'fighting discrimination' may lead workers to respect or challenge different cultural/religious views on contentious issues, this reflective approach at least gives practitioners some possible approaches to thinking about the issues involved when established standards just indicate they should do 'whatever is appropriate'.

This approach, however, does require practitioners to continue to reflect not just on skills and process, but on the central issues of the purposes and values within the work, and how these may best be related together.

By prematurely universalising aims and standards across diverse practice, the skills-driven managerialist agenda can leave little room for continuing debate and reflection over these still-contested issues. In policy-makers' hurry to discover 'what works', and practitioners' frequent desires for quick-fix solutions to everyday issues, at best there is little time or desire to address the more fundamental question of what this practice is aiming to achieve. As such, this standardised form of quasi-professionalisation that is being imposed is in danger of falling into the trap described by Jeffs and Smith (1990:130):

> "The problem with skills-led training is that it is incrementally bolted on to a partial analysis of practice and purpose. Faulty and restricted perceptions of essential role, purpose and practice ensure that the skills taught must be inadequate to the task. Sustained analysis and theory making become superfluous within this model, being perceived as 'obscuring reality' and 'getting in the way of action'. In the end, it is only by luck that any contribution to the good can be made. Overwhelmingly, skills-led training obscures the development of understanding about what exists, what is good and what is to be done."

In re-opening up the possibility of reflecting on what contributes towards 'the good', rather than assuming that existing standardised statements manage to capture this in its entirety, space can be made for alternative Christian conceptions of the purpose of community work. At present,

the national standardised material offers little space for this, frequently failing to take into account the differing combinations of varying theological rationales and individual/group interests that were central to local explanations and actions.

For example, the closest references to faith in the National Occupational Standards (Paulo, 2003) were using terms such as 'belief', 'values', 'identity' and 'ideology', mainly in terms of "the importance of being able to identify your own beliefs and values" (p.154) and knowing "How to enable groups and networks to express their own beliefs and sense of identity" (p.31). Where there is conflict between these groups based on such characteristics, the required response is typically to help groups identify the causes of the conflict and take "appropriate" action.

Crucially, a Level 4 core skill is to "Develop practice by monitoring and evaluating progress against values and practice principles of community work" (p.149) which requires the worker to "Evaluate [their] own values, beliefs, identity and knowledge in light of community development work practice values and principles." (p.149). There is no mention or room within these pre-defined, standardised 'practice values and principles' for faith, except so far as it agrees with the particular predetermined wording. This effectively removes the possibility that practitioners might also reflect on and evaluate the stated community development work practice values and principles in light of their own faith.

Hence, in practice, where these models were being applied, even the potential that different aims and methods for such work might exist was largely ignored. This can leave those practitioners whose personal identities, rationales and aims are not being validated by the larger strategic organisations feeling increasingly isolated and unable to connect their personal experience with the broader techniques presented. It also contributes towards a further understanding of the organisational dynamics and trajectories outlined in Chapter 4, given that an approach which discourages reflection on competing values and principles is also reminiscent of the limited learning systems described by Argyris and Schön (1978). Their theory describes how organisational systems which only allow for reflection on matters of implementation, whilst obscuring different values and principles which may be in conflict, severely limit the capacity of these organisations to learn, adapt and survive.

Without individual practitioners being able to reflect on such dilemmas, nor highlight them more publicly, they severely constrained their ability to find appropriate ways of resolving or managing them in their particular project. This was particularly crucial as, for many of the Christian practitioners observed and interviewed, it was their personal relationships and ability to explain the reasons, values and principles behind particular processes in different ways to the various different local stakeholders (depending on their different aims) that was seen as

making the difference between their perception of success and failure in their local work. Those who were observed to have been able to manage more sustained work had necessarily had to develop a more integrated rationale that genuinely blended theological, personal, social and organisational goals together.

The lack of a place for faith in reflecting critically on the stated purposes and values of community work was also seen as having broader repercussions for Christian community workers. Various practitioners and infrastructure agencies expressed concern that by uncritically adopting current policy terminology and accepting prevailing political trends within standardised approaches, this would allow faith groups to simply be co-opted into whatever agenda was held by the government of the day. Examples of the creeping acceptance of prevailing political concepts that were accepted by some infrastructure providers, but frequently contested by practitioners, included the idea that all work with people can and should be quantitatively measurable and measured. Despite being included as a central principle of Faithworks' national "benchmark of professionalism and excellence", as noted above, many practitioners were uncomfortable with this concept. Some articulated critiques drawing on their own theological understandings and rationales for practice that enabled them to deal with the pressures for this kind of measurement in sophisticated ways. In doing this, they cited their need to remain true to their alternative understanding of 'what makes for

human flourishing', recognising that these processes may take time or even never be directly observable or observed by the practitioner.

Attempting to standardise faith groups' and practitioners' practice in the purported desire to improve standards or even "professionalise" the sector thus brings with it several significant limitations, as this section has outlined through an analysis of the research data. Most significantly, such approaches were seen as removing the potential for faith groups and practitioners to engage in critical evaluation on policies and practices in light of alternative viewpoints that proactively draw on their rich theological traditions. When combined with the analysis presented in earlier chapters, it becomes clear that this critical reflection which includes theological reflection is crucial to retaining what various Christian practitioners referred to as a "prophetic edge" or "distinctive contribution".

Morisy (2004:25) summarises this position well in describing how "the pressure to drift into [just] becoming a voluntary provider of care and service is intense, and with this comes the danger of secularizing the church from within". In order to counter-act this, she advocates abandoning the current emphasis on "meeting needs" within a bureaucratic and rationalistic framework. In doing so, this can stand in the way of the churches' potential to learn from engaging in a form of community work that is central to the churches' mission.

6.4 Conclusion

Overall, this chapter has shown how each of the approaches to dealing with practice diversity found within the data had significant limitations.

Leaving decisions between diverse potential practice responses just down to whatever is deemed 'appropriate' leaves practitioners with little guidance as to the principles which might inform this decision, or what to do if they conflict. Whilst attempts to find a common language to bridge differences might help in making initial connections, an overemphasis on commonality can obscure much of importance within the differences, limiting the resulting relationships and practice. Some differences require more than translation, and the attempt to just agree a common language may hide various agendas. The attempts to devise or impose standardised forms of practice have often gone further than the other approaches articulating a normative basis for practice. However, these approaches have frequently failed to acknowledge or allow for reflection on differences in purpose, which leaves them ill-equipped to cope with the diverse range of theological rationales and aims bubbling under the surface of Christian community work. In addition, the regulation of the work of individual practitioners into frameworks of standards that are preoccupied with establishing linkages with national policy agendas can further challenge Christian practitioners in finding space for their alternative theological

understandings and faith-related personal and organisational identities. In doing so, when combined with the organisational dynamics outlined in Chapter 5, this can contribute to the loss of the 'distinctive contribution' that faith-based organisations are thought to provide.

Moreover, all the approaches to managing practice diversity which are being deployed (apart from the occasional reflective practice encouraged by some infrastructure providers) obscure rather than explore the diversity uncovered by the research. By failing to recognise and address this diversity explicitly, each approach leaves significant room for powerful stakeholders to co-opt the term 'good practice' to their own ends. This leaves the term "good practice" as simply an empty vessel, able to be filled with the prevailing political or hegemonic agenda of the most powerful stakeholders of the day. In other terms, the only meaning that can be attributed to the term "good practice" as used in this sense is "any practice which meets the different needs and aims of those engaging in defining it".

This also leaves practitioners struggling to resolve their day-to-day dilemmas without an adequate theoretical base, reliant instead on the changing whims and agendas of more powerful bodies who vie to contest what should be considered "good", and deploy various hegemonic forces including labelling, legislation, accreditation and funding allocation to enforce their perspective.

Chapter 7: Identity, Learning & Practice

7.1 Introduction - Developing a Place for Faith in Practitioner Education, Training and Development?

The previous chapters have identified substantial limitations with current approaches to dealing with diversity within Christian community work practice based on the research conducted. The problematic organisational dynamics identified in Chapter 5 and the difficulties with existing approaches to defining 'good practice' for individual practitioners identified in Chapter 6 both highlighted missing dimensions relating to faith identities and the incorporation of theological reflection within practice. In order to consider these dimensions further, the final stage of the research was split into two main halves. The first half (considered in this chapter) focused on exploring the place of faith within practitioner experiences related to professional education and practitioner development. The second half (considered in Chapter 8) focused on a project which appeared, prima facie, to challenge previous findings in many ways, not least through incorporating the missing dimensions in their project design and approach.

The focus on practitioner education, training and development was chosen because the previous findings had highlighted the contested place of Christian faith identities and beliefs within community work

practice, especially when complicated by different approaches to understanding 'professionalism' in this work. This raised a potentially important question which had partially been obscured by the original research question in its focus on the abstract concept of 'good practice': what do practitioners see as contributing towards developing 'good practitioners'? This led to additional research being conducted to explore different perspectives on the place of faith in programmes of professional education and/or development, and what issues explicitly including faith in such programmes might present. This chapter explores the findings from this additional research, which contributed to further developing the overall analysis.

7.2 Methods Used to Further Develop This Aspect of the Research

This part of the research consisted of several components:

(i)   Two focus groups that aimed to explore the education, training and professional development needs of faith-related community work practitioners in the North East region in January 2007. These focus groups were organised by another infrastructure agency as part of a project to assess these training needs, with the researcher having been invited along to help by taking notes of the resulting discussion. All participants gave informed consent for the discussions to be

observed and recorded for the purposes of both pieces of research.

(ii)   A focus group held on 25th May 2006, attended by 23 practitioners and trainers from across the North East region, together with thirteen additional interviews conducted between April and June 2006. These were focused specifically on whether local practitioners and infrastructure bodies in the North East felt that it would be helpful to introduce a specific 'faith-based' route to the current MA Community and Youth Work programme at Durham University. The researcher had been asked by the university to be responsible for organising this consultation.

(iii)   Interviews with five (out of eight) Christian students who had just completed the existing professionally-accredited undergraduate community and youth work programme at Durham University via a specific 'church-based route'. These students were all aged under 25 and were relatively inexperienced. For most of them, their attendance at university was the first time they had been away from home, where they had been well integrated into an evangelical church environment. These interviews critically explored student experiences on the programme they had completed, whilst also seeking their views on the implications of these

experiences for any future programmes, including the proposed changes to the MA.

Further details of these components are provided in Appendix D. In all cases, access to these sites was secured as a result of being actively involved in these networks, not least as a part-time tutor for the undergraduate programme at Durham University. This role included having taught a specific 12 week module on 'Community and Youth Work in a Christian Context' on this programme. Given this involvement, particular attention was paid to the reflexivity and ethical issues outlined in Chapter 4, not least by ensuring that the student interviews were entirely voluntary and took place after all involvement in assessment had been completed. The inclusion of sites focused on community and youth work, rather than just community work, in the latter two instances reflects the historical coupling of training in these fields. Given that many of the available programmes across England continue to link these two fields, with those community workers wishing to become professionally qualified often attending joint programmes such as this, this provided a good opportunity to explore this connection.

Before the findings from these components are discussed, a few preliminary explanations of the background and methods are necessary to set this work into context.

The latter two components of this additional research took place against the backdrop of proposed changes to the programmes offered by the university in terms of faith-related community and youth work. In particular, these changes entailed the phasing out of the existing undergraduate programme, which had included a mainstream non-faith-related route and a church-based route for those who wanted to specifically consider work in Christian settings. However, university staff were considering whether to introduce a new optional faith-based specialism to their professionally-accredited Masters-level programme. If implemented, this specialism was intended be open and relevant to those of any faith or worldview, not just Christians.

A range of interested participants from faith groups, voluntary agencies and training/education bodies were involved. These included several who had experience of hosting student placements from the same professionally-accredited undergraduate degree programme referred to above. The interviews were used to ensure that a broad cross-section of people and groups from as many faith groups and settings as possible were included, and included eight telephone interviews and five face-to-face interviews.

From here onwards, both these respondents and the undergraduate students interviewed are collectively referred to as 'university respondents'.

The specific aims of this event and these interviews were twofold:

(i)   to explore local perspectives on whether an optional 'faith-based' specialism as part of the professionally-accredited MA Community and Youth Work programme would be helpful to local practitioners; and

(ii)   To explore any theoretical or practical challenges that may need further consideration if such a specialism were to be successfully established.

A full list of those consulted is provided in Appendix D. Those invited to the event or sought for additional interviews were selected based on local knowledge and contact lists provided by:

(i)   Local infrastructure agencies;

(ii)   The list of placement agencies used by the existing university courses in community and youth work; and

(iii)   A contact list of youth-related projects compiled as part of a larger university research project into 'Young People and Faith' (see Ahmed, Banks and Duce, 2007, for details).

At least one of those interviewed was also an ex-student of the BA programme from several years beforehand, and this interviewee had personal experience of supervising one of the current students

interviewed, which provided some useful cross-comparative connections. Any noticeable gaps in terms of those consulted (for example, in terms of coverage of organisations from particular faith backgrounds) were addressed using 'snowball' recommendations made by the initial respondents where appropriate, with the aim of resulting in a manageably-sized but diverse group of key stakeholders. There were weaknesses in this approach, given the tendency of networks to build up around shared interests and perspectives; however, this approach was considered sufficient at the time for the purposes of the university's own consultation exercise, given limited time and resources.

For the purposes of this thesis, additional data was collected in January 2007 from the two further focus groups regarding the training needs of faith-related community work practitioners. These sessions were advertised under the title 'Working with People from Different Faith Traditions'. 20 people attended the first session and 15 people attended the second sessions, consisting of a range of practitioners who were either personally coming from a faith perspective, and/or working in organisations that were faith-related, and/or did significant work with people where faith was a relevant issue. The key questions which these focus groups aimed to answer were "What issues or barriers have you faced when bringing together groups from different faith/cultural backgrounds?" and "How have you tried to address these barriers and can you give examples of what worked/didn't work?". The planned

format of the sessions was based on small group discussions on these questions with between five and eight people in each group, followed by an opportunity for these small groups to share the main points from their discussions.

These sessions were organised by the Churches' Regional Commission in the North East (CRC) in partnership with a local Churches Acting Together (CHAT) Development Worker, with an invitee list based on their alternate sets of networks and relationships at a local level. Accordingly, these events attracted a much more locally-oriented set of practitioners from the Newcastle area, providing a good counter-balance to both:

(i)   the largely professionalised, strategically-connected participants who chose to attend the initial university-organised session.

(ii)   the strongly-church-embedded Urban Ministry and Theology Project in making up the cluster of research in the North East area (for details on this aspect of the research, see Chapter 8).

This counterbalance was considered necessary because of the previous research findings which had suggested that there may be significantly different perspectives between those with close institutional relationships with churches and those who were much more on the

fringes of established faith groups (or independent of them), as well as between those with strategic and more locally-oriented remits.

Participants in these two consultation sessions had attended based on a clear brief that their comments would be documented anonymously as part of the consultation process for wider use, and participants also gave informed consent for the data to also be used as part of the additional research for this thesis. In addition to my own detailed notes, this analysis also draws on Damm's (2007) official report on these events.

In all the events, interactive exercises (for example, distributing small sticky notes to all participants and asking them to record their comments and responses to particular questions on these and then stick them onto pieces of flipchart paper) were used alongside the main small group discussions, from which notes were taken.

All these interviews and events demonstrated a strongly-felt need for more training for faith-based and faith-related community and youth workers in the region across a wide range of different levels, from introductory to professionally-qualifying. In doing this, participants frequently made reference to the current social and political context as necessitating more training and education provision that could directly address this field.

However, the findings from the different parts of this research raised complex issues regarding the precise place of faith in the training and

education process and different potential reasons for including a focus on it. In addition, these findings highlighted again the importance of recognising the role of identity in the resulting processes. These findings will now be presented in an incremental way, beginning with the findings from the broader focus groups before considering the specific feedback received concerning the university programme.

7.3 Owning Identity or 'Professional Neutrality'? Practitioner Perspectives Beyond the 'Veil of Equal Opportunities' and 'Fear of Offending People'

Within the CRC/CHAT workshop session discussions, the diversity of ways in which faith was seen to affect practice, the diversity of potential aims within such practice, and the diversity of contexts in which this might take place, quickly became apparent. This began with practitioners acknowledging the different ways in which faith might impact on the discussions, which Damm (2007:3)[43] summarises in the following way:

---

[43] As explained above, I was officially tasked with taking notes from these focus groups, especially for the small groups attended. Hence, whilst this section frequently cites Damm's report, much of the material cited originates from my notes. The official report has been cited in most instances because it indicates that these notes were then independently verified by the main facilitators as reflecting the wider discussion outside the particular small groups I attended for inclusion in the official report.

"Many of the volunteers and workers at the workshops had their own faith perspective to bring to the discussions. They also had experience of working with people from different faith traditions on a one to one basis and felt that they could respond to some of the issues which participants of services or groups had experienced."

The combination of people at the workshops reflected some of the diversity of different individual and organisational contexts within which work with people from different faith traditions took place. Attendees came from a range of organisations, including both (a few) directly faith-related groups and a range of statutory agencies (including Sure Start, schools, family-related agencies, museums and various refugee agencies).

The attendees noted the lack of opportunities available to them to discuss issues relating to faith and culture in terms of how they affected their work, which in this case had resulted in workers attending the event from a wider area than originally intended:

"There appeared to be real demand from people to meet together to discuss issues relating to faith and culture, with many people

---

Where issues only arose in the particular small group I attended, I have used my own notes, and indicated this with the label 'small group notes' in the appropriate places.

saying this was the first opportunity they had had to explore the issues that faced them in their work."

(Damm, 2007:2)

In these events, a range of practical difficulties (such as different languages, different special dates, different food requirements, childcare, etc.) were again identified as creating difficulties for people to engage with each other. However, even when these were overcome as far as possible (through basic religious/cultural literacy and specialist provision of services such as childcare, translators, etc. where necessary), there remained a stubborn set of issues which refused to be resolved just by practitioners applying contemporary understandings of equal opportunities. In keeping with the analysis above, these issues were summarised in the resulting report as being "culture/knowledge" and "faith/identity". These issues are outlined in the resulting report in a way which enables further exploration of the impact of faith on identity and practice by beginning to highlight what an approach which 'goes beyond religious literacy' might entail. It does this largely by highlighting a range of questions raised by practitioners, and exploring practitioners' own highly idiosyncratic ways of resolving perceived tensions between their understandings of equal opportunities, anti-discriminatory practice, and the requirements of religious literacy.

The respondents at these events were almost unanimous in recounting a 'fear of offending people' as a significant issue which prevented them from addressing and sometimes even acknowledging faith and/or culture in their practice (Damm, 2007:5).

Participants explained that this fear stemmed from a number of sources. One initial reason was described as "I can't ask because I should know". For this practitioner (and several others who showed their agreement with her point of view in the subsequent discussion), the expectation on her to be religiously-literate was an obstacle. This was because this expectation had the perverse outcome of inhibiting her ability to "just ask" questions respectfully in order to learn directly from the different groups with whom she was working.

However, this wasn't the only underlying reason which informed practitioners' fears of offending people. For some, even just mentioning religion or faith in their practice would be considered as a potentially divisive move, and hence was frowned upon. The official event report commented that "The very use of the word 'faith' can also be seen as divisive" (Damm, 2007:5).

Even when trying to counter the stereotypical view of religion as problematic and divisive, one participant reflected on their understanding of how this related to current applications of equal opportunities in the following way:

"We've never found any problems with religion. We just respect everyone and religion isn't mentioned."

(Small group notes)

For some, even those within nominally faith-owned agencies, constructing an encounter or activity as being solely about inter-faith encounter was construed as problematic in itself. This was because the activity then started from a position of division rather than emphasising what was held in common:

"[One Christian agency] initially had difficulty in recruiting women to attend their sessions because of the reference to 'faith' in the title of the group, which the women were unhappy about. The group was renamed 'Friends Together'."

(Damm, 2007:5)

Another participant described a corporate programme designed to integrate workers from different backgrounds which had failed in its aims whilst it was called 'Interface' and focused specifically on relationships between two oppositional cultures. To counter this, whilst still needing to achieve the same aim, the programme was re-framed as being concerned with 'Communication Skills'. The participant described how this programme was subsequently much more successful, since 'communication skills' were something everyone was seen as being able to improve, whereas the 'Interface' programme was seen as only being

required by those who had a problem relating to other cultures (i.e. attendance was related to an attached stigma of potential racism, which inhibited both attendance and learning).

This construction of the professional agency and/or training arena as a 'neutral' space was thus seen as a potentially positive development which overcame an initial reluctance for bringing together people from different perspectives. However, in practice, this often seems to have been interpreted to imply that any mention or manifestation of faith within the mainstream activities of this work would automatically be divisive, and hence the issue of religion itself becomes taboo within the work. For those workers who had personal faith commitments, this meant that they often felt that they were viewed with suspicion by both their own faith community and community workers from other settings. Paradoxically, though, those workers with faith commitments, even from different religions, often found they had more in common with each other than with their secular counterparts. For example, one worker with a local Christian project commented that those who were reluctant to enter their café because it was identifiable as a Christian project were more those who identified themselves as being of no religious faith than those of different faiths. (These issues were also mirrored in the student responses discussed below).

Much of the treatment of faith as taboo within practice was linked to these practitioners' understandings of equal opportunities principles,

and their reluctance to engage in an encounter which could be perceived as a colonial attempt to convert and/or promote one particular culture, belief or view over another:

"I have to respect equal opportunities. I can't promote one religion over another religion."

However, this understanding of equal opportunities frequently seemed to be interpreted by workers to mean not feeling comfortable in speaking of their own faith at all in any of their practice. Instead, these practitioners felt the need to 'leave their faith behind' when working as a professional. This then meant that an important aspect of many of the workers' own identities was being neglected, just in case any public expression of faith was experienced as offensive by others. It also inhibited any sharing of personal experience that might contribute to an overall increased religious literacy amongst those with whom practitioners worked. At the same time, for faith-based workers, it challenged their personal commitment to respecting all aspects of diversity, because it seemed to result in a failure for their own diverse commitments to be respected. This was particularly the case for Christians in the group, who expressed concerns that they could not fall back on an alternative cultural rather than religious rationale for their actions, and hence often felt reluctant to express any aspect of their

faith publicly. The resulting inhibition occurred despite personal experience that indicated others did not have an issue with some public expressions of their faith:

> "The Christians in the group discussion recognised that they had not met anybody who had been affected by their celebrations of Christmas... [but] often felt less able to publicly celebrate Christmas as a religious festival, compared to those festivals celebrated by other faiths."

> (Damm, 2007:5)

When it came to applying this understanding of equal opportunities in their practice, workers saw some advantages in adopting a 'professionally-neutral' exterior. In particular, the creation of a 'neutral' space and projection of a 'neutral' professional image was seen as a useful coping strategy which could be used when dealing simultaneously with groups who had historically-ingrained cultural animosity towards each other. In such situations, practitioners gave examples of citing equal opportunities principles to justify their continued engagement with all groups, even when this engagement was questioned by others:

"I hide under the veil of equal opportunities ... [I explain that] because of equal opportunities, I may have to work with people I don't like."

One notable example of this which was cited was a practitioner who was working simultaneously with different groups of refugees, including both Hutu and Tutsi refugees, despite the history of the civil war and human rights violations between these groups in the country from which they have fled.

However, not all practitioners present had chosen to try to adopt an approach which aimed to create a 'neutral' space for encounter. One practitioner described a group which aimed to enable people to talk about faith, but which was designed to be open to people of no faith too, providing they were aware that faith was the central topic for discussion. In this group, the practitioner described how a 'neutral' venue could actually present "too many barriers to cross at one time – strangers, strange customs, strange language, strange building, strange food". As a result, rather than moving into a 'neutral' venue for these discussions, the group had decided to move round to a different faith-owned building each session. This had the interesting result that "people became hosts" and could each explain their own perspectives in turn, which enabled a much more positive atmosphere and interaction.

The net result of all of these discussions was considerable confusion over the expected role of faith in practice, especially in terms of whether one's own faith might be shared with others, exacerbated by the avoidance of addressing such topics directly in training:

> "One volunteer queried: 'As a volunteer, how should I identify with my own faith tradition? And how vocal should I be?' This led onto discussion as to whether people should leave their faith behind when they went to work, or could you share your faith with other people, if for example, you had built up a relationship and trust over time? It was felt that this was an issue which was frequently not talked about in training."

> *(Damm, 2007:5)*

Other aspects of a worker's identity added to this confusion over the complex ways that faith and culture might impact on practice interactions:

> "Workers also experienced difficulties in getting people from different backgrounds to mix and feel comfortable in new situations and be open enough to share their emotions and experiences, especially where they were not encouraged to do this in their own culture. ...

The characteristics of the worker can also make a difference, for example women from certain faith traditions may not attend a group run by a male worker [because of faith or cultural reasons]"

(Damm, 2007:5)

Implicit in statements such as this was the additional factor of the different faiths, traditions, attitudes and cultures of those with whom the practitioner may work. As the discussion went on, the practitioners began to recognise dilemmas as they tried to reconcile a generalised respect for diversity with particular encounters where they were unsure whether particular views or attitudes (often grounded in religious or cultural justifications) should be challenged.

Two dilemmas which participants had personally experienced were recounted. The first dilemma was described in Damm's (2007:4) report as follows:

"One dilemma discussed was how to deal with one venue's unwelcoming reaction to an Iraqi men's group who attended a community centre. The worker was unsure whether she should challenge her work colleague about this attitude; get the group to complain; or just go to another more welcoming venue; or some other response. In practice, it was often easier to just go elsewhere."

Here, the reason for the unwelcoming reaction was not entirely clear. Whether the reluctance to accept this group stemmed from it being a group of 'foreigners', and/or because it was a men's only group, or because of the particular country they came from, or because of their perceived likely attitudes to other centre users, especially women, etc. was unclear to the worker. However, this left the worker unsure how to respond to the perceived prejudice, and on what basis.

In another case, a black Christian practitioner had decided to work with colleagues to intervene to challenge the prejudice of someone using the service:

> "A local member of the BNP [British National Party] who had come into a community café said he would not be served by a black man. In this case, there were other voluntary workers present in the café, and they had supported each other to gently challenge this behaviour, and tried to build a relationship with the man, despite his original prejudice."

> *(Damm, 2007:4)*

In this case, to challenge the prejudice of the BNP member was seen by the practitioner as necessary to uphold a central principle he saw as being derived from his faith (the principle that all people are equal and valuable in God's eyes, and that this meant they should all treat each other accordingly). In this case, individual faith informed the decision to

challenge the service user in a way which was in accord with his understanding of equal opportunities principles and anti-oppressive practice. The faith-based ethos of the project, as enacted by the anticipated support from the other (white) workers, contributed to their decision not to step in to serve the local person when he initially refused to be served by the black practitioner. This left space for the practitioner to begin building contact by taking over a cup of tea regardless of the initial hostility, and begin a conversation.

Even in situations such as this, where there was general agreement that the displayed prejudice should be challenged by a worker, participants emphasised the importance of considering carefully how this was done. For example, the immediate reaction here was not to ban the BNP member from the café, despite his offensive comments, but instead use the views expressed as an opening to engage in an educational process involving an exchange of views and experiences. Underpinning the potential for this exchange, however, was the creation of the safe space of the cafe by an organisation consisting of people who shared values, underwritten by faith, of the need for respectful encounter which did not necessarily require an initial agreement between views.

Much more controversial topics mentioned included those situations where workers encountered differing attitudes to some Muslim women wearing hijab, and different gender expectations in different cultures. Some of these were perceived by some participants to be oppressive and

hence needing to be challenged, whereas for others, these topics were considered 'off-limits' for discussion out of 'respect' for the different cultures involved. Even where workers personally felt they had questions about these issues within a particular local community, they felt inhibited by discourses of political correctness and what one participant referred to as the 'I don't like to ask' aspect of English culture. Other controversial areas cited included:

> "Differences in culture were also apparent in family life, such as the way that children are treated (e.g. condoning smacking) or how women are treated (subject to domestic violence or arranged marriages)"

> *(Damm, 2007:9)*

Another participant then expressed her concern over the expectation that all cultures should be unconditionally respected by explaining how, in her experience, culture could be used as a tool to control people, when not everyone within that culture subscribes to the supposed cultural norms. She felt that in oppressive situations, women in particular (whether practitioners or not) were often told "If you don't accept this, you are not being respectful to your culture" *(Small group notes)*.

In these and other situations, the practitioners recognised that there was frequently a "tension between 'official' religious beliefs and [their own]

personal faith", and sometimes a fear of what religious leaders or others in a particular faith community might say or do if they became aware of beliefs or practices which did not match their cultural expectations.

For these practitioners, then, irrespective of their own position in relation to faith, if they wish to engage in 'anti-oppressive practice', they soon experienced a dilemma: Do they offer unconditional respect to *all* cultures, regardless of those manifestations of different cultures which appear to be oppressing weaker groups, or when might other values which inform their practice necessitate a response which could be perceived as cultural imperialism? This dilemma is exacerbated by the complex connections between religion and culture which were being encountered by the practitioners. As one practitioner noted:

"People [are increasingly] realising that distinguishing between faith and culture is very difficult... when they thought they were clear."

(Small group notes)

In some of the examples given, the expectation that all aspects of all cultures should be automatically respected even seen by white male workers (both Christian and non-religious) as being oppressive towards them, because of the priority perceived to be given to other cultural perspectives when they clashed with their own culture. One particular example of this was the highly divergent views held by male workers

over whether family service provision should be restructured to exclude them and male clients. This was seen by some as necessary to facilitate attendance by those Muslim women for whom their personal views, culture, or male relatives insisted on single gender provision. However, some of the male workers experienced this as prejudice against men. In addition, several respondents questioned whether this expectation of single gender family provision was an aspect which should be challenged, as it was seen as stemming from societal oppression within a particular culture. For some workers, it also undermined their own strong personal and cultural values concerning the need to provide alternative positive male role models within family work and opportunities for people to build positive relationships with people of both genders outside the family home.

Underpinning all of these questions, one participant recognised that much of this debate arose from a "lack of clarity of what the problem is" that professional practice in this context is intended to address, as well as how this should be done. For some, the problem may be seen as (to give just three examples) sin or disobedience to God's will as handed down via received tradition, whereas for others the problem may be the difficulty in handing down the tradition to the next generation, and for still others the problem lies in the dogmatism implicit in these other reasons. Needless to say, the framing of the problem has a significant impact on the response that stakeholders expect practitioners to make,

and frequently involves working in a way which militates against competing explanations of the problem.

In responding to these dilemmas as part of the group discussion, respondents initially gave a highly idiosyncratic set of personal explanations for their practice decisions, often recounting personal stories or experiences of previous dilemmas which had led them to their current position (such as the encounter with the BNP activist and the hostile community centre which rejected Iraqi refugees cited earlier). Through considering each others' personal examples, the group began to make some important distinctions to clarify the principles which might guide them when dealing with controversial issues such as these. These principles could be summarised from the research notes as including the following points:

- "We know there is difference, so we have to train people to deal with diversity"

- This involves encouraging practitioners to constantly be willing to first ask, listen and learn from others about their own individual, group and cultural understandings and experiences.

- This requires "encouraging everyone to bring/contribute what they can and valuing all contributions" as people's honest starting point

- At the same time, practitioners need to be able to "be themselves" and confident in their own identity

- People must always be respected, irrespective of their views, but their views could be constructively challenged or disagreed with where this was considered necessary from a point of view of worker integrity and/or agency aims.

- Explicitly sharing more of a personal understanding of their faith is permissible, but there is a "need to wait to build trust" before doing this and depending on the context, perhaps should generally be down to the client "as their own decision, on their own terms"

In addition, on a corporate level, agencies could work together more rather than competing, making referrals where appropriate; bring services to clients in an accessible way (including appropriate advertising, etc.); address practical issues (such as childcare and interpreters); provide training/support on these issues; and be willing to change in response to what is learned through this exchange. On a policy level, practitioners felt that changes were needed to ensure continued funding for work which enabled these exchanges to take place (not least in terms of reinstating the full funding for 'English for Speakers of Other Languages' courses, which had recently been cut).

However, even after this discussion, such was the remaining confusion about how to tackle some of these issues that practitioners felt they needed further training to help them address these issues, but still found it difficult to articulate exactly what this training should cover, or how.

7.4 What Place for Faith in a Professional Education Programme?

The difficulties expressed by the practitioners within the focus groups regarding dealing with diversity within their practice, and the training which they felt was needed to address these difficulties, were reflected in slightly different ways within the findings arising from the MA respondent data.[44] The interviews and event raised fundamental issues and questions regarding the place of faith within professional programmes, which this section will consider in more detail. The importance of addressing these issues and questions was felt by respondents to be crucial if the professional training offered by the university was to meet local needs.

A few of the university respondents' concerns were primarily practical, and related specifically to the perceived needs in this particular local area. In particular, the level of this particular programme was considered far too high in relation to much of the local demand, which consisted more of part-time volunteers and full time workers who may

---

[44] This section also draws on the official report (Orton, 2006) produced for the university as a result of this process, together with small group notes taken by three appointed note-takers (the co-facilitator and two research assistants) as well as the researcher's own notes.

not have a first degree. This does, however, highlight and reinforce the potential mismatch between the increasingly professionalised discourses and the reality of typical provision in these settings, which was seen as often led by people without professional qualifications, nor necessarily desiring them.

Aside from these practically-oriented issues, however, the primary concerns of these respondents related to widely different ideas about the proposed faith-related MA specialism's aim, structure and content. All these primary concerns problematised the relationship between faith, culture and professional practice, especially in this training environment; hence, they potentially raise additional questions concerning the place of faith in learning about professional practice. It is these findings which will now be considered.

Different Roles and Aims?

The questions raised over the programme's proposed aim related firstly to the wide range of potential participants which a programme with a specialism in faith-related community and youth work might attract. Those whom the university respondents suggested would make likely applicants for such a programme included clergy and other faith leaders, local government community cohesion officers, regional officers within infrastructure bodies or faith structures, and those community and youth workers who work or wish to work in multicultural or faith-related

settings. Whilst this broad range of potential applicants could clearly add to the likely viability of such training, university respondents frequently questioned whether these groups might all hold compatible interests, motivations, levels of experience and expectations for the proposed programme.

When asked what they would like to see as the main aim for the programme, the responses could be grouped into two broad key themes, which highlight diverse expectations regarding the place of faith within professional community and youth work training:

(a)   Religious literacy for all – but is this enough?

(b)   Addressing diversity and/or working from a particular place within it? And to what aim?

These will now be outlined and explored in more detail.

(a) Religious literacy for all – but is this enough?

Firstly, there was a general consensus that any professional community and youth work programme should ensure that all professional community and youth workers have a basic level of religious and cultural "literacy"; i.e. that they are aware of basic differences between different faiths/cultures and have the core skills needed to interact with

difference sensitively. This was seen as being important irrespective of a worker's own personal, political or religious worldview, and irrespective of whether the programme was designated to be 'faith-based' or not. It was also seen as important despite the potential for the more conservative members of some faith communities to resist any multi- or inter-faith work[45] which brings them into contact with those who hold different views. For example, one set of small group notes commented:

"Churches may not be happy about inter-faith work, and this may be a barrier to the type of people who do the course."

This possible resistance was seen as contributing towards potential barriers to those accessing the programme, because the inclusion of other religious perspectives might lead these potential participants to receive opposition or (more likely) ambivalence from sponsoring organisations:

---

[45] The term 'multi-faith' typically refers to an approach which includes an awareness of several different faiths without acknowledging a personal faith commitment, worldview or standpoint. In contrast, 'inter-faith' typically refers to approaches which aim to develop a relationship between more than one person of different faith traditions. The term 'multi-faith' is more typically associated with this 'religious literacy'-style approach. However, usage does vary significantly in both other literature and practice, and the two terms are often used interchangeably (as the following quotes indicate).

"Who will support individuals to do the course [given] issues of funding[?] Will organisations see the benefit of employees taking the course? ... Even though there is a gap within faith teaching, and a growing need for inter-faith teaching, there is no professional incentive."   *(Small group notes)*

Faith leaders were seen as crucial stakeholders whose views would be crucial in determining the level of support received. However, these same faith leaders were considered to have a generally low level of awareness regarding community and youth work, and in some cases perceived as having a lack of understanding or even active opposition to some of the values of community and youth work:

"Faith leaders were felt to be a barrier. Especially those that had little experience of managing community workers. Are we proposing to create isolated, unstructured posts with little chance of sustainability/understanding from the wider community? Education *from within* needs to take place first."

(Small group notes - emphasis in original)

However, these factors alone were not seen as being sufficiently contentious to prevent a programme of this type being delivered. This was because of the perceived potential benefits that such a programme might bring. These benefits included producing workers able to address the perceived need for more work with faith communities that helped

them to understand each other more, with this inter-faith learning potentially "help[ing] practitioners to manage their communities better". In addition, some participants felt that a willingness to explore how different perspectives might relate together should be a requirement of a critical academic programme at an MA level. For example, one set of small group notes commented:

> "At an MA level, people should be able to have an interfaith perspective."

The more contentious elements arose at the point where some respondents felt it was necessary to "move beyond basic religious literacy", as one respondent put it, and if so, how? Many respondents were not looking for training which provided in-depth teaching of 'facts' about all possible faiths. For example, one set of small group notes indicated that:

> "[The] need is less for teaching about individual faiths/cultures – people at MA level should develop the skills to find out for themselves."

However, at the same time, there was equal concern that just promoting common skills and/or what I would summarise as 'those common factors where different faith/secular perspectives might agree' could also be problematic. As with the findings from the earlier research, whilst some respondents were keen to promote those areas where commonalities

could be found, others consciously highlighted concerns with just taking this approach. In particular, there was concern that a generic faith-based approach might attempt to homogenise disparate faith traditions in ways that failed to connect fully with the complexity of their diverse belief systems, cultural influences and practices. One set of small group notes recorded this concern in the following way:

"All faith-based communities are not the same, [so] would the course hinder the type of knowledge workers had? The course may 'homogenise' the faiths to the point w[h]ere you are not helping any one faith group."

Instead, respondents tended to emphasise the need to engage with the specific underlying values and belief structures as essential, with one set of small group notes commenting:

"There is a need to bring fundamental values to the surface."

Several reasons were given for doing this. If practitioners are to be tasked in the longer term with developing contact and relationships between diverse groups as part of their community work practice, then it was seen as important to develop their ability to relate to the specific theological and cultural tradition of the particular faith community with which they are working. For example, one respondent commented that if relationships between different faith groups were to be developed, then it was important to directly address the "theology behind dealing

with other faith groups" if congregational views were to be tackled and better relationships built.

However, an equally important reason behind bringing potentially diverse theologies, cultures and values to the surface was to enable students to relate theory to practice for themselves, by engaging with their own cultural and theological tradition in a critical, reflective yet supportive way. One person was recorded in the small group discussion notes as commenting:

> "In community and youth work there's the issue of relating theory to practice and in addition, there is the faith dimension. There's a need to be clear about where you are coming from. An agreed line that you won't cross. [What is needed is] Critical reflection on issues of identity, values and commitments with others."

In doing this, just adopting a 'religious literacy' approach was not considered enough for working in any depth with or within faith, as it fails to connect with differing individual and corporate positions, or differing understandings of the purpose and nature of community and youth work in a faith-related context. For example, one set of small group notes recorded:

> "One of the key barriers for the course is that not all faiths have a concept of [community and] youth work, or may have different

faith values ... Does [community and] youth work have a legitimate place within all communities[?]"

Equally, however, dabbling with faith without thinking through the resultant issues was also considered potentially problematic. Current students on the undergraduate church-based route who had been interviewed had all expressed reservations about the level of integration of faith with practice on this course. These were amongst the most insistent respondents in describing the potential difficulties if the university tackled the new programme specialism in a similar way. For example, one student described the potential problems from their point of view in the following way:

"Basically, I cannot get my head around how you can do a faith-based thing like that, because there are so many opinions between Muslims and things like that, and different ways of looking at the world within faith, and to merge that, especially when you have got a small course, how can you genuinely explore your own faith journey when this is what you genuinely believe in and really get into the nitty-gritty of what is going on. I think they haven't managed that well with just the Christianity as well as everything else here, so to open it up to more faiths... it's like trying to run before you can crawl, or whatever else like that. They've leapt, and they haven't managed this well, in my opinion."

In including faith but failing to recognise the depth of issues involved, respondents were concerned that there was a resulting danger of at best failing to please anybody sufficiently. At worst, one of the previous BA students even thought that an approach which tried to address faith, but didn't recognise the depth of issues involved, could actually damage students' personal, professional and/or spiritual development:

> "I think you end up with an awful lot of very... possibly broken people... if it went wrong and I'm not sure it's worth the risk of doing that."

(b) Addressing diversity and/or working from a particular place within it? To what aim?

Given these perceived risks of engaging with faith in a more in-depth way, it was worth exploring further why an approach to diversity that was just based in religious literacy was not perceived as sufficient, and what alternatives might exist.

Responses from participants revealed more than one potential perceived aim for engaging further with faith as part of practice, and complex levels of differing identification which could shape the resulting engagement. As indicated above, learners can show complex levels of differing identification which could shape the resulting engagement. For

example, one previous undergraduate student described her position in terms of layers of preference:

"[Interviewer] If you had to speak for yourself and decide between doing the course you are doing now and one that was generic faith-based, which one would be more attractive?

[Student] I'd pick the church-based. Yes. Because for starters, I want to learn more about my own faith and how to include it in my practice, and work out how they go together, because I'm not Muslim, and I'm not Hindu, nor any of the others. But if there wasn't a church-based route, then I think I'd probably do the faith-based. I wouldn't go "NO! There's no way I'm going to do this.". It's the same as working on the entire course, working alongside people who are atheists or agnostics or other Christians, but not on the Christian course. I don't think we've had any other faiths, but in a sense, there have been different belief systems within that. It's kind of the joining together of the main professional things, and because we've had the church-based extra, I don't know whether there would be scope within a multi-faith [course] to divide off a bit more, so you have your 'together bit' specific to your faith/religion... I don't know, interesting. [...] It holds tensions between them."

In terms of different aims, these depended significantly on where the practitioner may be perceived to be operating from, and the perceived purpose of any resulting encounter. The dialogue that takes place between different points of view (whether intra-faith, inter-faith, and/or faith-secular) was seen as an important asset of programmes such as this. In fact, students indicated that this asset had been a primary motivator which led them to choose this programme over more specialised and exclusive 'Christian Ministry' programmes. Within the educational experience, however (as we will explore further below), students had also valued the provision of space for internal reflection on the specific theologies and practices relating to their own faith tradition. Crucially, however, students also felt that there was a need for them to be able to identify where their traditions might begin to connect with the wider material, by also including reflection on the connections between faith and practice on the mainstream part of the course, not just in the faith-specific elements.

As this thesis has already demonstrated, community workers themselves could be motivated by some degree of faith-related values, understanding and worldview, or may not be. These community workers could be working within one of a range of organisations, including local groups, infrastructure organisations or statutory bodies, or based in some form of hybrid partnership combination of these organisations. They may be operating in organisations which may or may not have some

current or historical affiliation with a particular faith, and which may relate their faith or values to their work in highly diverse ways. The faith-related element could be at any of these individual or corporate levels, or in the nature of how they might relate together with others at the same or different levels. And each of these individuals, organisations and partnerships will be characterised by different combinations of purposes which form the reasons for their interaction.

Hence, when it comes to offering and structuring training for those who may operate in faith-related contexts, university respondents frequently asked the deceptively simple questions "Who is the course for?" and "What would be its main aim?". Both of these questions were frequently tangled together. For example, community cohesion officers from local authorities were seen as being one group of likely potential applicants if the focus of the course was targeted on broadening knowledge of several faith groups. The additional knowledge and skills that they would be interested in would typically be focused on proactively addressing issues of community cohesion and integration across different cultural and religious groups from a state/policy perspective. Members of the clergy may also be interested in such a course, but whilst they might share these concerns, they would likely require greater content and reflection exploring the connections between community work, theology and the development of their own faith community. Other faith-motivated professionals may be more interested in gaining a nationally-recognised

qualification that explored the particular dynamics of working in the context of a religious organisation, or from a personal faith-basis in a range of different organisations. Such divergent purposes challenged the creation and retention of a hybrid space within the learning programme.

Respondents also recognised that those attending such a programme may bring with them divergent aims for their practice. For some faith-based practitioners, an implicit primary aim may be to improve attendance at worship services or "make church grow" by exploring spiritual/faith development activities in different settings, whereas for others it may be more to produce charitable services with some faith connection that meet secular standards of efficiency and professionalism (or some combination of these). Still more may be concerned with building coalitions or dialogue between different faith-based organisations, with or without other more secular bodies, in order to change some aspect of society.

Whether these respondents saw potential participants as operating from within or outside faith-related organisational bases (and/or from a personally faith-informed point of view), or within complex hybrid spaces, the purpose of their engagement with faith still frequently involved diverse implicit forms of intended change or development. Examples of such changes include groups and individuals working for greater consensus to campaign for a particular change in legislation or corporate theology/church practice, deciding to provide new services for

a particular group such as local refugees, promoting greater understanding between people from diverse backgrounds, or generating increased organisational capacity amongst faith-based groups to achieve their aims. In many of these cases, to achieve these changes would require action of some form by practitioners to try to change other individuals or organisations at the same or different levels. This could be argued to require a clear understanding of where you were operating from and what you were aiming to achieve through the engagement.

However, many of the practitioners here and in the focus groups discussed earlier lacked an ability to articulate clearly what their intended aims were within practice, and how these might fit together. Instead, there appeared to be confusion amongst the practitioners about this, not helped by the failure of the training opportunities that they had experienced to make space to consider faith-related aims and identities theoretically. Hence, practitioners were over-dependent on their own individual idiosyncratic attempts to cope with the competing expectations which threaten to undermine their practice. At the least, as the respondents indicated, it introduces a complex diversity of potentially-implicit aims which may affect student expectations in undertaking training. As the training develops students' skills in critical reflection, these diverse aims may become more explicitly-realised, with students expecting support from tutors in their attempts to clarify and

respond to such competing expectations in their practice in a way that connects integrally with professional and theological education.

The debates about the proper role of faith in professional identity and practice were even more immediate and pressing for the students interviewed, as we will now consider.

7.5 Barriers to Faith-Related Learning: Student Experiences

A different set of issues and dynamics were apparent for those student practitioners interviewed who had just completed a programme of professional education at university. However, rather than demonstrating that training automatically addresses these issues and provides practitioners with the necessary development to enable them to articulate a firmer basis for practice, these students had all found that their experience on the programme had reflected many of these confusions in some complex ways.

Programme Structure – Integration or Segregation?

The Community and Youth Work programme which these students had attended was designed to incorporate a specific Christian 'church-based' specialism within a generic BA Community and Youth Work programme. Briefly, this entailed students on both routes sharing all lectures during the first two years, with students on the church-based specialism taking

two specific modules (one on theology, and a second on 'Community and Youth Work in a Christian Context') in the third year. Students on the church-based route also attended extra individual and group tutorial sessions with a separate church-based strand tutor throughout the three years, in addition to those required of students on the mainstream route. As part of the programme, students had to complete two placements during the first two years, and for students on the church-based route, one of these had to be with a Christian organisation.

This design allowed for specific time and space for Christian students to engage in programme-related learning concerning their faith, which students had generally found incredibly helpful, if somewhat "squashed" to one side (as one student described it). However, because this design incorporated additional tutorials and assignments relating to the church-based route during the first two years that were set by the church-based strand tutor but which were unaccredited, students felt devalued and that there was a lack of recognition for this aspect of their learning.

In addition, students did not feel that there was space or encouragement to mention faith within the mainstream of the programme, making the topic largely 'taboo'. When students had raised faith-related matters within mainstream lecture discussions and assignments, they reported that they had often felt patronised as naïve and unprofessional, as the following quotes illustrate:

"I just get the sense that if you bring in your faith, it is frowned upon, because it is unprofessional. That's the feeling... that's what you sense. Almost, 'Oh, bless them for thinking that!' type of sense, you know?"

"You don't want [the lecturers] to agree with everything, but there are times when you think 'Are we being taken seriously here?'"

For others, their experience of trying to introduce their faith into mainstream discussions on the programme was even more negative, resulting in them feeling personally under attack because of their faith, to the extent that "it didn't feel it was OK to be a Christian on this course at first". Other students described being told by previous year's students how they would be "picked on if you hold particular viewpoints on Christianity".

At its most extreme, this perceived lack of engagement by the mainstream aspect of the programme was seen as creating a fundamental clash of perspectives between two sides holding mutually incompatible viewpoints:

"They [some students on the church-based route] have their Christian faith and they feel that it's the ground for everything and they can't get away from that. I also think that some of the secular lecturers, they see that their way is *the* way and there's no way round it."

As a result of this clash of worldviews, the valued provision of the segregated space to consider faith issues in more depth became more negative because of a lack of facilitated mutual space to reflect on the connection between the two aspects of the programme. For example, one student expressed the following typical view:

> "I don't think there's been enough dialogue between the two aspects of the course. I think there's been an awful lot of brick walls on both sides, of we're going to do our thing and you can do your thing, and not even think about how they could look [together]."

This dynamic was exacerbated by students' perceptions of lecturers as either concerned with secular professional practice or Christianity, but not both at the same time (until one final unit at the very end of the course). The net result was to make any discussion of faith seem 'taboo' to the students within the mainstream lectures.

Student Responses to Different Ideologies

In this context, the crucial challenge for students (as for many of the more experienced practitioners considered earlier in the research) became trying to work out how their faith and professional practice might relate to each other in terms of what made for 'good practice'.

Three broad types of student response to this challenge of relating faith to professional practice were recounted. The first of these responses managed the different ideas and bases for practice resulting from the different worldviews in a relativistic way, accepting the possibility of multiple starting-points for practice. Students adopting this perspective expressed themselves in the following ways:

> "It's just an understanding you've got to get, the respectability for their ideas, not that you have got to accept them or anything; you've got to be willing to listen to them."

> "Even if you don't necessarily agree with one hundred per cent of it, you can go 'Actually, that is where some people are coming from', and that's useful to know because the world isn't just a happy 'everyone gets on with each other, everyone comes from the same viewpoint' type of place, so to see the difference, even amongst classmates, is really good."

However, as a result, these students frequently had difficulty in determining or justifying any criteria by which to decide between competing alternatives when it came to trying to apply these diverse viewpoints to practice situations (especially when experiencing a dilemma), or explain in more abstract terms what 'good practice' might consist of. A variation on this was the response adopted by one student, who typically adopted a 'devil's advocate' position. This position

recognised the need to critically assess different perspectives, both secular and Christian, but struggled to then express which of the perspectives (or combination/adaptation of them) she would adopt to resolve the tensions/issues she had identified between them. As a result, she was often seen as unnecessarily argumentative and provocative by the other students, because she inevitably challenged whatever they said during group discussions without necessarily holding with the views she expressed.

Other students responded to conflicting perspectives by acknowledging that different perspectives on both worldviews and practice did exist, but that these perspectives could be dualistically split into those which were truly 'Christian' (and hence right) and those which were 'worldly', secular or different to their tradition (and hence wrong). These students had no difficulty in owning their own point of view on practice, and usually were able to relate their own personal faith tradition to it. However, they instinctively blocked and rejected any perspective perceived to be tainted by 'the other', often to the extent that they were unable to critically reflect on alternatives to their own intuitive view of what was 'good practice'. In addition, they frequently found it incredibly difficult to consider how this may have been conditioned by their particular cultural or religious tradition.

Conflict and Challenge - Group and Student/Tutor Dynamics

These different responses created particular pedagogical difficulties across the programme. In this context, students described how group dynamics and the dynamics between the tutor and the student had interacted with their personal identities in complex ways.

One of the most important factors described was where the students perceived 'the other' was coming from who was challenging them. Students recounted several situations where they had come into conflict with lecturers and placement tutors who they felt simply had not understood the extent and ways in which faith influenced their lives and practice, or recognised the impact of their own worldviews on the debate. This was exacerbated by some students retaining confusion over whether professional practice should be value-based or necessarily 'neutral', having perceived differences between tutor perspectives from different parts of the course. These findings clearly echo earlier issues raised by the data. Whilst students did sometimes engage in debate with these tutors, often they felt under pressure to "tell them what they want to hear" in order to graduate from the programme and avoid conflict. This included over a broad range of issues, such as whether there was a place for bible study within professional practice, whether giving contraceptive advice was consistent with Christian practice, and whether talking about one's faith was an acceptable part of professional practice. For most of the students, the tensions between these different

responses created pressures to adopt a schizophrenic reaction to their thinking about faith and professional practice, keeping the two in separate compartments to preserve what they understood to be the internal logic of each. Some students achieved this through envisaging a separate 'Christian ministry' form of practice which was completely different in character to secular professional practice. By creating a separate category in their minds for the practice, and just accepting that the two forms of practice were different, they did not then see the need to resolve any tensions between the two.

For those students who felt safe enough to adopt a different approach, this challenging environment made them "totally overhaul their faith" and "go back to basics" in terms of their beliefs and how they related to those around them who may not share their beliefs. This was seen by the students who felt they had achieved this as a challenging but ultimately worthwhile learning process which had prepared them well for practice.

However, for a minority of students, this perceived challenge to their beliefs had not resulted in learning arising from a critical reflection on their faith and how they expressed it. Instead, encountering any form of contestation had simply entrenched their existing views in a defensive reaction against anything which challenged them, with no potential for movement on any point. These were the students who had struggled the most with the course content and assessment; one student referred to

these students as the 'black and white' Christians (i.e. those who adopted an entirely dualistic approach to their faith and its effects on their lives). This made it difficult for them to conceive of legitimate alternative responses to theological or practice issues which might be different to their own and yet still equally 'Christian', whilst allowing them to reject anything different to their existing point of view because it was not 'Christian'. As a result, engaging reflectively with the different perspectives held by the Christians in the group had been an important intended part of the teaching on aspects of the course, especially towards the end in the Christian-specific components.

The students recounted several experiences of when they had been challenged by tutors on points of view which they saw as related to their faith, with widely varying reactions. In principle, all students recognised that some element of challenge was essential to their learning. However, in practice, how this challenge was received depended on who was doing the challenging, the perceived motives behind the challenge, and the character of the learning space in which the challenge took place.

For the majority of the students, especially those from an evangelical background, an important dynamic which influenced their engagement in learning was feeling that they had to publicly "stand up for God" in class discussions (as one student put it). This was combined with an equally strong taboo against being seen as "ashamed of their faith".

However, those students who were able to think through their faith as part of the learning process were able to question whether "standing up for God" and putting God first in their lives necessarily meant becoming entrenched in their original views. These students critiqued the other students, who they perceived as "carrying a billboard" as their way of integrating faith with practice, or holding "hard-line teaching that people hold in front of them" because "that's what they've been told", rather than because that's what they believe because they've thought it through for themselves.

Student explanations of the implications of the learning process for their identity (and their identity on the learning process) helped to explain why students had reacted in these diverse ways to a similar learning environment. For the students interviewed, their faith formed a central part of who they saw themselves as being, a holistic 'worldview' which affected their understanding of themselves, others and the world around them. Any attempt to challenge central aspects of their beliefs was thus potentially threatening to their fundamental sense of themselves and their entire outlook on life. Those students who were able to reflect on and develop their understanding of their faith in response to such challenges felt "stronger" as a result; either because they had been able to filter and refine their existing beliefs to come back to a sense of what was most important within their faith, or simply because they had

managed to survive what the defensive students had perceived as an attack on their very nature.

So what made the difference between these different reactions and most enabled students to learn rather than respond entirely defensively? Student responses indicated that the crucial factors were the creation of a "safe space" for learning that integrated faith with the wider professional education process, combined with students' perceptions of the integrity and purposes of the tutor.

For example, placements were seen by the students as important spaces where their faith and other programme-related learning could have been integrated, but this was often problematic in practice because of tutor and organisational dynamics. Several students recounted experiences of tutors on secular placements seeming initially prejudiced towards them because of their faith, of which the following account was typical:

> "I found it hard on the secular placement as they knew I was a Christian coming there, and the woman that was supervising me was not a Christian and had turned away from it, and very much on her guard about having me there, I got that impression. And then it was a case of I was at the top of the stairs and she was at the bottom with a couple of young people and she was saying "We're not actually going to take you ice-skating, we're going to take you to a cold, stone church, and you are going to be sat there and

bored to tears", and I was upstairs going "I can't believe that I'm hearing that!". But it was just a case of, it totally undermines you, and where do you go from there?"

Where supervisors were more willing to discuss faith and fluent in their ability to explore different theological underpinnings, as well as able to explore how these might relate to practice, this was seen as helpful. Without this support, students typically described it as follows:

"But the whole placement and the theory, I find it quite hard to bring it together. I was getting there, well I got there about by the end of my second [placement], ... but trying to bring [theory and practice] together before and say 'that lecture goes with what's happening here' was really difficult, because they were polarised, almost."

In this context, it was often easier for students to try to avoid the struggle to relate faith to practice explicitly, given that it was possible for most of the programme to adopt different discourses for different audiences (in ways not dissimilar to the pressures on organisations to be schizophrenic as recounted earlier). This was counteracted when students had to critically discuss the relationship between faith and practice with tutors who had some understanding of both, and made space for this type of discussion. However, even in these circumstances, other defensive mechanisms seemed to operate because challenging a

student's point of view when it was connected to their faith meant that it could also be sensitive and personal, as one student described well:

"I think it is a very hard thing to manage, and I do think people need to be picked up on what they come out with sometimes …. [but] how to do it? I mean, it can be done diplomatically… some things are really sensitive for people, and sometimes I suppose that hasn't been fully recognised. In the way that sexuality might be a very sensitive issue, and yet you wouldn't go and pick on someone that was gay, or you might think about the colour of someone's skin 'Are you thinking that because you are black?', 'Are you thinking that because you are gay?'. You wouldn't say that to someone, in the way that you wouldn't pick on someone and say 'Are you saying that because you are a Christian?' Do you see what I mean? I really don't want to come across as being like there are things that people shouldn't be asked about their faith, or anything else like that, but being able to recognise just how personal an issue it can be."

Even in the context of the final Christian-focused modules (including the module I had taught), there was significant diversity of belief and diverse ways students proposed that their beliefs might affect their practice. A minority felt that just raising controversial topics was in itself divisive, and should be avoided. However, most welcomed the opportunity to discuss these topics, as they were likely to affect future

practice, providing such discussion took place in what they described as a "safe space". Challenging assumptions was important for learning within these safe spaces, but what mattered was how students were challenged.

To manage these difficult discussions, students valued tutors who taught with "integrity":

> "I think the thing that sticks out in my mind is: I know the lecturers who love what they're doing because it shows in the way that they teach, like it makes you interested in what they are teaching, it just flows out of them... [they] have a passion for the subject, like they are teaching it for a reason. .... I guess integrity would be the word"

However, this did not necessarily mean that the tutor shared their personal perspective on controversial issues (whether primarily theological, such as infant baptism, or of a personal/social nature, such as abortion, sexual ethics or how to address poverty) – indeed, it was often seen as unhelpful if they did so, as in the process of 'taking sides' it could exacerbate difficult group dynamics. Instead, a skill in helping people to see where others were coming from was seen as important, and through this process being able to allow everyone to develop their own perspectives by learning from each other. Where successful, this

brought students to the point of seeing a different dynamic relationship between faith and practice, as described by one student:

"It is 'how can you hold your beliefs and how you respond to your beliefs and what you are encountering', I think. That's the difference. You can believe something, but there are hundreds of different ways you can react to something with a given set of circumstances in front of you, and one could be to deny part of your beliefs, one can be to full on accept it, but then within those two, there are ways to keep hold of your beliefs and go with them but not condemn things that go against it? That sounds almost profound!"

Managing this realisation required students being able to understand diverse theological traditions and schools of thought which led to different perspectives being held. In addition, some students had found it helpful to focus more on the ethical practice implications rather than debating the controversial issue itself, including considering the differing extents to which practitioners should reveal their own positions and/or expect others to adhere to them:

"Within ... a seminar, there was a question as to what ethics should be for yourself, what should be for the Christian community, and what should apply to the entire society. ... There are some things that directly affect you, but maybe it's not the best idea to impose

on somebody [else, even though] they are a good thing to grasp. ... Whereas some things, like 'do not murder'... or 'don't steal', ... aren't just a personal thing. They affect society, not just the Christian church community, [so] everyone should be encouraged to take them on in a lawful way. That difference, almost."

Where students did not feel that they had space to reflect and critically think through distinctions such as this, and their implications for their own practice, a few students had found that the threat to their identity outweighed the perceived benefits of reflection. As a result, these students had simply responded to the challenge to think through this relationship between faith and practice by becoming increasingly defensive of their existing position, as originally received from whichever faith tradition and culture they originally came from.

7.6 Conclusion and Potential Implications

The findings presented in this chapter illustrate widespread confusion amongst respondents about the place of faith within practice. Some initial perspectives perceived good practice in terms of a professionalised neutrality supported by a basic awareness of possible cultural/faith differences. However, such perspectives quickly became challenged when practitioners and those involved in their development had to address different potential purposes apparent in the work and

manage everyday situations which presented them with dilemmas. With conventional training denying or limiting any place for reflection which incorporated faith as part of a practitioner's own identity, practitioners were left to draw their own idiosyncratic conclusions about the relationship between faith and practice. Such conclusions were frequently challenged and/or refined given the opportunity to discuss them with other practitioners. In doing so, reflection on how their perspective related to others holding the same faith and how it related to others with different worldviews were both seen as important. However, just structuring in isolated opportunities to consider faith-related issues, without considering the character of these spaces and their relationship with the wider learning approach, was considered problematic. As a result, these findings indicate that recognising difference and incorporating reflection on difference within practitioner development is crucial. The ability of practitioners to develop their understanding of the relationship between identity, worldview and practice can then inform the way they handle difference within everyday practice. Deciding on a course of action in a particular situation can then flow out of an integrated worldview with a clearly-considered connection between personal and professional, that enables practitioners to act with integrity whilst not being closed off to considering alternatives or learning from others. This is no mean task to require of any practitioner, let along relatively new or inexperienced

ones. Yet, the formation of a framework which enables them to make connections between these issues which facilitates future reflection, and incorporates elements of personal and organisational identity without essentialising them, seems crucial. At the heart of this, recognition of the different potential purposes within Christian community work, and how they might relate together, becomes essential. A more detailed analysis of how such a framework might be constructed, drawing on the analysis within this and earlier chapters, and drawing clearer conclusions, will be considered in the final chapter. However, before such a discussion can take place, it is important to present the findings from the final case study, which provided a setting in which potential relationships between these contested issues of purpose within Christian community work might be considered further.

Chapter 8: The Urban Ministry and Theology Project: A Counter-Trend Organisational Example?

8.1 Introduction – Community Work and Changing Churches

This chapter presents the findings from the research undertaken for the final organisational case study, the Urban Ministry and Theology Project in Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

This case study was designed to challenge earlier findings as far as possible, by focusing on a model of church engagement in community work which was strongly embedded within established churches and which had been designed to incorporate theological reflection from the outset. This model connected the issues of organisational identity and individual identity together by choosing to focus directly on these issues within their theological reflection on traditional models of church in order to facilitate change.

The chapter begins by presenting a summary of the project and the reasons for selecting this particular project as the final organisational case study. Full details of the research carried out for this case study can be found in Appendix D. The chapter then goes on to discuss the key

themes arising from this research within a particularly unusual and creative context, exploring these in comparison with the themes outlined earlier in the thesis. The presentation of this discussion reflects the nature of the extended, participative, reflective exchange which was chosen as central to the research approach at this stage. The chapter concludes by considering different understandings of church development and community engagement which became apparent from this discussion. These are tentatively combined into a model which reflects the different dimensions found to be involved in Christian community work throughout the research overall.

8.2 Case Selection Rationale – A Counter-Trend Model

The final organisational case study was carried out in 2005/6 focusing on the Urban Ministry and Theology Project (UMTP), which is based in the East End of Newcastle-upon-Tyne[46].

---

[46] For further details, see the Project's website at http://www.umtp.org/. The project actively chose to be used in this identifiable way, as detailed in Chapter 4, and agreed to the usage of the information contained in this chapter in the thesis. Project staff gave full comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

As indicated above, the final organisational case study was chosen for theoretical sampling reasons. For reasons that will be detailed below, this selection was based on the principal rationale of being the "least likely instance" discovered where previous findings might be likely to apply (see Denscombe, 1998:33). In addition, it presented an "extreme instance" (op cit), given that it appeared (at first glace) to represent a very different approach to Christian community work, as the discussion below highlights. This was designed to enhance, test and refine previous findings to improve their rigour.

At first glance, this project appeared to have been established in response to similar conditions to those facing many of the other Christian community work projects studied. The project was originally formed in September 1999 after 1 ½ years of planning, and geographically covers six parishes, four of which are considered 'core members' (Russell, 2004)[47].

At the time of its inception, the parishes in this area reflected broader problematic trends, embodying declining traditional church

_____

[47] Russell's evaluation report provides the grounding in the historical development and overall positioning of the project reflected in this chapter. This report confirmed the initial data gathered as part of this project, and enabled the research time to be spent focusing on more recent developments and the relationship of the project to the wider data.

congregations located in crumbling old buildings and seemingly culturally

distant from the changing urban regeneration area in which they were

based. In addition to these issues, Russell indicates that the parishes

had previously struggled to attract clergy, partly because the majority

had signed resolutions refusing to accept women priests. In these ways,

at first glance, the Project seemed a likely candidate for following the

broader trends and patterns identified in the earlier research.

However, *prima facie*, the project seemed to be an 'odd one out' in

several respects which challenged the general trends observed in the

previous findings. Firstly, the project's structure and stated approach

had been intentionally embedded in wider Anglican Church frameworks,

using core church resources from the outset, in contrast to the

previously-observed tendency for projects to be more peripheral.

Secondly, the explicit intention of the work included *both* church

development *and* community engagement, within a model of working

that saw these as integrally-related. For many of the other projects

which had been observed, the aim of changing churches was frequently

either non-existent, tangential or possibly an implicit outcome, but

rarely as explicit as it was here. In those cases where an explicit

connection was made, community engagement tended to be viewed as a

direct route to achieve numerical growth in church membership. In

these cases, the balance of expectation for change lay with those

coming into the church (to become more like those already within it),

rather than involving the expectation that this engagement would change the church itself. For UMTP, engaging the churches with other local people created learning opportunities for the congregations as well as opening up pastoral and prayer opportunities, with one member of staff referring to their role as being "to expose them to these experiences, no matter how painful they are, so that they can learn and grow … but not leave them high and dry" in the process. (In practice, these definitions warranted further attention, as I will shortly discuss).

Figure 1: The Urban Ministry and Theology Project Model

Community Engagement

Church Development

Theological Education

In addition, the infrastructure-level dynamics observed elsewhere tended to result in most support being offered to those congregations (in effect, usually parts of congregations) who presented themselves as wanting to change and get involved in community work. Thus, this project was unusual because it focused on:

(i) the whole congregation (including those who were sceptical or reluctant to embrace the community-focused parts of the work), rather than just a sub-set of community activists, and

(ii) not just any congregations, but a specific set of traditional congregations who might be seen as more resistant to this work and/or change more generally.

By doing this within a model that covers a wider area than just those core congregation parishes opting to be part of the project, the option for further congregations to become part of these changes remains an important part of its potential. Indeed, this is illustrated by one of the current four core member congregations, which only fully joined the project part way through. This happened when the congregation received support from the UMTP team and saw the benefits of its approach.

Thirdly, in order to enable both church development and community engagement to be achieved effectively in a way that related to each other, UMTP emphasised a specific integral role for critical theological

education, learning and reflection, for contributing both to their own development and to wider debates.

Together, all the elements adopted within this integrated model consciously build on the historical position of the churches in this area. As a result, this historical contribution is purposefully valued, whilst held in tension with an explicit recognition that a key project aim is to change and develop the traditional church in the area.

In taking this approach, UMTP stands in marked contrast to the findings from earlier in the thesis, which showed many contexts relating to Christian community work struggling to find ways of structuring in reflection on theology and identity, despite a frequent concern with demonstrating the 'distinctiveness' of this work.

The distinction between the UMTP approach and other investigated approaches appears to be the way that this project has been committed to including the churches in continual, critically-reflective ways. By including a concern with 'church development' as an intentional outcome arising from this reflective engagement with local communities and processes, UMTP appeared to be addressing the trends highlighted in earlier chapters which led to creative Christian community work spaces breaking down.

In doing this, UMTP's approach is also worth distinguishing from existing theoretical descriptions available in the literature, as discussed in

Chapter 3, such as Morisy's (2004) critique of the ways churches get drawn into meeting needs by just uncritically adopting bureaucratic welfare principles through the delivery of arms-length professionalised projects. Morisy's work in general provides a powerful description of an encounter-based approach to Christian community work which would generally be supported by the data so far. However, in line with many of the alternative approaches to difference outlined earlier in the thesis, Morisy's approach is based on churches seeing an 'oblique' relationship between mission and community engagement. An 'oblique' approach discourages focusing critical attention on this relationship, allowing space for unexpected outcomes. The difficulty with such an approach, however, is that it adds to the general tendency by practitioners to fudge the issues and interests involved, exacerbating the problematic practice dynamics and organisational trajectories outlined earlier in this thesis. Indeed, by making 'obliqueness' a principle for good practice, it valorises this confused and problematic state of affairs as an asset rather than a liability. A more balanced recognition of this approach is described by Baker in terms of "blurred encounters", whose blurred nature may result in an apparent consensus initially, but can subsequently result in disillusionment and "burn out" because "the one thing that motivated you – your visions, values and ideas – have been rendered inoperable by the fog of the blurred encounter" (Baker, 2007a:1).

In contrast to such an 'oblique' approach, then, UMTP's approach saw church development as an intentional outcome arising from this reflective engagement with local communities and processes, rather than one which requires an oblique approach in order to be successful. The alternative adopted in this UMTP approach is based on an encounter which is explicit and reflective, intentionally creating spaces where an exchange can take place and reflecting on how best to construct those spaces to facilitate this, rather than pretending it is a by-product that the church didn't expect (even whilst using it as a rationale for some church members to lend their support). Russell (2004:56) describes this approach as being different primarily because of its sequence, "starting with the mission of God in the world, moving towards His work within the church itself...; first being open to the complexity of life around, then developing a sense of ministry to the whole community". Whilst she sees this as a tangential approach to church development, because it doesn't focus solely on the small existing congregation, it is not oblique in Morisy's sense, because of the continuing intention and focus on building church in this place, just via a different route. Neither is it a crude attempt to resort just to achieving 'more bums on pews at the traditional Sunday service'. Rather, it uses the relationships and understanding built from its engagement with 'the complexity of life around' and the people living and working in that area to explore different potential manifestations of what church might mean in this

place. The ways in which it does this, and holds this in tension with received tradition, will be explored further shortly.

Finally, a further element of UMTP's approach which sets it apart from many of the other observed projects was the way that all of the staffing arrangements for the core member churches have been integrated into UMTP's way of working. At the time of the research, UMTP had a core team of four full time clergy in post, plus part time administrative support[48]. The staffing structure involved an integrated cross-parish team work approach in which individual clergy have both responsibility for one core parish and a specialist role across the wider project area. In contrast, many other projects relied on volunteers and/or staff who were funded on a short-term basis specifically for the community work, and certainly perceived as less integral to church functioning than the local vicar. Elsewhere, clergy involvement in community work tended to

---

[48] One of these members of staff was slightly different, being a member of the Church Army, a "society of evangelists linked to the Church of England" (Church Army, 2006). Whilst they had originally been funded through time-limited trust funding applications, the diocese had recently decided to fund this post themselves too. As a somewhat different category to a standard priest, this did raise some issues about how the role related to the other clergy, and the provision of initial short-term funding for a post which was about establishing "sustainable" forms of church was considered problematic.

be viewed as contributing oversight and occasionally initiating projects, as an 'optional extra' in the crowded expectations on clergy, rather than being seen as a central part of their role. Those with specialist community work roles elsewhere tended to be a step removed from particular parishes, offering infrastructure level support to those involved in community work across a wider area as their main role.

On this basis, UMTP was chosen as a case study to critically explore how data gathered from observing and questioning their markedly different approach might generate additional insight into the overall thesis analysis. In addition to these potentially counter-trend characteristics, the project was part of the Anglican Church, which had frequently been perceived as playing a particularly influential (if ambivalently-received) role throughout the research so far[49], thus offering an opportunity to explore this aspect of the data further.

Informal interviews were carried out with each of the project staff in situ and participant observation undertaken at selected times over several weeks to gather data on a range of the work undertaken. Full details of this process are provided in Appendix D. As part of this process, informal access to other local stakeholders and documents

---

[49] See, for example, the NVIVO node 'Anglican lead role', included in the list of NVIVO nodes in Appendix G.

enabled a broader picture to be obtained and the data gathered to be understood in its complex local context. The informal nature of this observation sometimes necessitated notes being taken shortly after a discussion, rather than during it, and audio recording leading to full transcription frequently was not undertaken. This meant that comments recorded have often been included in a paraphrased fashion, as full verbatim quotes have not always been able to be included to illustrate all of the points reached. However, the validity of the account was verified through detailed discussion following the production of an earlier version of this paper directly with the UMTP staff team. This style of research was ethically necessary in order to be as unobtrusive as possible because one of UMTP's principles involved avoiding contributing to the tendency for areas such as the East End of Newcastle to become 'goldfish bowls' where people's daily lives become disrupted by multiple researchers interested in 'deprivation'. At the same time, the participant element of the approach enabled a genuine dialogue between previous findings and local perspectives to be generated by posing appropriate questions after observing what was already taking place in a particular situation, a mode of research which demonstrated respect for the local understandings and facilitated further exploration of the issues. Ethically, this reflective engagement also enabled me to provide something in return to the project for granting access, time and

energy to the study, through offering constructive critical questioning as an aid to their reflection.

At the time of the research, one of the core parishes, St. Anthony's, was without a member of clergy, limiting research access to this congregation during the study. This absent post was also responsible for the community engagement role, and was in the process of being filled, but with other staff covering the community engagement work in the meantime, a reasonable picture of the project's work in this regard was still obtained.

8.3 Key Themes from Findings

This section critically considers four of the key themes which frequently reoccurred in the data gathered, highlighting their impact on the project and relationship to the wider findings. The section begins by considering the impact of the large-scale building schemes being carried out by the project, before analysing the complex role played by tradition and culture in this case study. Different approaches to participation and empowerment within the project are then explored, before considering the wider ecclesiological questions raised by practice in this context.

1. The Impact of Large Building Changes

Three of the core congregations within UMTP had begun undertaking substantial changes to the physical buildings they had inherited. Each of these different buildings was at different stages of development at the time of the research, and held different physical locations which affected their relationship to the wider community:

St. Silas' Church: Physical development of this building had been successfully completed, incorporating offices for a local housing association, a smaller worship space, and a community space separated by glass within the original church structure, together with toilets, kitchen, entrance and crèche space. Commercial redevelopment of the surrounding area has left the church cut off from housing by a shopping area, dual carriageway and Metro line, although the church is adjacent to a small set of housing association properties built on the site of the previous church hall. Here, the newly-redesigned space has provided improved facilities for the different church activities and community groups meeting throughout the week, and some opportunities for building relationships with those in the adjacent housing. However, the direct connection and formal involvement with the housing association remains limited, and the church continues to explore ways to make connections with surrounding shoppers.

St. Michael's Church: This large and imposing hilltop church was in the early stages of redevelopment, as dry rot was treated and the basic fabric made sound. Local geography and planning have combined to put it in an iconic position, central to an estate and with remarkable views and visibility, whilst also being very difficult to reach, up a steep hill without an easy route for direct access. Plans for longer term use as a social enterprise partnership were being developed to make longer-term occupation viable, described by one member of the congregation as trying to find a way to use the church for the community but trying not to forget why we are there". In the meantime, the congregation themselves had temporarily occupied a small shop unit down in the middle of the estate, making them more accessible for local people to 'just drop in'. They had subsequently used this position to begin new activities which enabled them to build new relationships with others in the area, including establishing a popular informal after-school children's club.

St. Martin's Church: This centrally-located church in Byker had undergone a complete demolition in order to make way for a new, purpose-built children's centre, nursery, community centre and church building that was in the final stages of completion during the research period. A new partnership arrangement had been established to hold the lease for the new building, which remained on church-owned land, and to run the building. One partner, Barnardos, was contributing the

expertise to run the nursery element, with the church employing a member of staff to manage the rest of the building, and other partners making other contributions. Having initiated and managed much of the project, the UMTP staff and the local congregation had made substantial contributions towards the quality of design, attention to detail and involvement of some end-users through the development process, with the exact working arrangements for the completed project still being developed at this time.

In each of these cases, the building development work showed evidence of being affected by the wider divergent forces, trends and pressures previously documented in Chapters 3 and 5 which overall can lead to the separation of the community work project from the church congregation. The development of partnerships to draw in additional resources and demonstrate wider forms of ownership of the work particularly reflected the broader trends identified in Chapter 5. St. Silas, the first building project to be undertaken, was physically the most complete. Here, the congregation and the major partner, a housing association, had ended up in a typically distanced relationship on a day-to-day level, although there remained some clergy-centred contact at a more senior level. This distance had possibly been exacerbated by the process of raising funding for the completion of the work, as there had apparently been some differences of understanding over who would be responsible for raising the balance of the funding during the process. Various external and

church-related groups continued to use the community element of the building throughout the week. To access the community space, people had to physically walk through the church worship space, but interpersonal connections between the people involved remained apparently limited. The church was also still in the early stages of exploring ways to connect with the many shoppers passing by nearby outside.

The re-building of St. Martins had resulted in the creation of a separate formally constituted organisation, St. Martin's Partnership, with the constitutional arrangements reflecting the broad range of anticipated stakeholders. This also broadly reflected the observed wider tendency to establish separate arms-length partnership organisations to operationalise projects. However, the reflective mode of engagement by the church had led to some further thought over issues of longer-term ownership, leading to a somewhat more considered rationale which took into account longer-term as well as short-term considerations. At the time of the research, some of the exact details of the constitution and other legal arrangements were still being finalised, but the broad plan involved the church retaining ultimate ownership through a long lease to the partnership. Many of the exact issues involved distinguishing between types or levels of stakeholder, and deciding on how best to involve these in the resulting governance structures, if at all. These different stakeholders included those who would be users of the

building; those who had been involved in helping establish the project from the beginning, including church members and partner agencies such as Barnardos; and those agencies that had more recently desired nominal involvement since the project had started to become a success. In doing this, issues of relative power were considered, planned and debated, helped and hindered by broader concerns such as fitting within Charity Commission guidance, especially in terms of the issues arising from involving beneficiaries in governance (Charity Commission, 2000). Questions from parishioners at the AGM raised some concerns about the extent of ownership felt by existing members of the congregation. Despite some of the congregation clearly feeling a sense of ownership (with one commenting "We're all part of the partnership"), others were observed to be less convinced or aware of the emerging relationship between congregation and project. These included, for example, the 'new' member of staff (who had been in post for around a year) being asked by a member of the church council during a church council meeting whether the council or Surestart employed them (when they were actually employed by the church). Other questions asked also illustrated church discontent over some aspects of the project presentation given, such as what the church's continuing role in the project would be, and whether people were aware what the church had given up in order to bring this project about.

The work at St. Michael's Church, on the other hand, had yet to result in formal arrangements for renewing use in the old building. However, the relocation of the congregation into its more accessible shop unit had begun to result in the church itself running additional activities in the new location, such as the children's work. In turn, this was challenging community and church stereotypes, with all of the activities taking place in a very confined (and hence shared) space. This was reported by staff to be resulting in a wide range of interesting comments from "bemused" local people who came or looked in to the shop unit, which included a communion table but little else by way of traditional church furniture, usually of the nature "It's not a *proper* church, is it?". These views and constraints in perception were not just limited to local people – one member of staff cited how church regulations often limited more integrated thinking, such as the Church Commissioners' apparent insistence that there should be a separate worship space in church buildings. This understanding was built on particular notions of 'sacred space', with 'sacred' being understood as being 'set apart for God', although this was being challenged by local theological understandings – with one local volunteer responding to this challenge by arguing "but this *is* a sacred space, as the Holy Spirit is here."

Hence overall, the wider forces detailed in Chapters 3 and 5 which had led other large community-work-related building projects to establish themselves as separate organisations were clearly still influential in this

case. These forces continued to challenge the church-community work project relationship in ways which encouraged the separation and distancing of one from the other. However, the impact of these forces appeared to be mitigated to the extent that the churches as a whole were being involved in the development of the community-focused activity, remained in ownership of it, and were encouraged to reflect critically on it.

2. The Influence of Tradition, Culture & Historic Understandings of Church

The second recurring theme in the data collected was the often paradoxical nature of the role that tradition and culture played in the life of the project. This took several forms, and reflected the ongoing dynamic interaction between clergy perspectives which Russell (2004:8) considered "reflected the diversity of theological positions across [the] spectrum of the Church of England", but all seemed to stem from UMTP's ongoing embodiment of Anglican culture and tradition.

Anglican History, Culture and Social Positioning

Defining what an Anglican culture might consist of is beyond the scope of this thesis, and could prove a lengthy and difficult task, not least because of Anglicanism's history of incorporating diverse doctrine and practices within a national established church, the Church of England (Hannaford, 1998a). However, what I am referring to here is that

several aspects of the work being undertaken (and the way in which this work was organised and managed) shared much in common with other Anglican projects observed during the research. This distinguished them from projects originating in other denominations, which incorporated some degree of different historical positionings, cultures and theologies. These included a particular emphasis on being the established church of the country, perceiving itself as having a special role and purpose in national life, with a parish system which is designed to cover every area in the country and a hierarchical structure, and a particular legal, financial and physical legacy, retaining at least vestigial respect and powerful connections (Hannaford, 1998b).

Across the country, this research found that Anglicans had been seen as making a particularly-forward and benevolent contribution towards establishing structures to broker between the state and other often smaller groups with fewer infrastructure resources. In many cases, the Church of England had also been involved in establishing resources and connections benefiting wider faith-based work (such as the Church Urban Fund and, on a smaller scale, instigating Active Faith Communities, the second case study organisation). However, this benevolent paternalism was not always perceived favourably by others observed during the research; nor was it always seen as 'practising what it preached' because it often seemed unaware of the impact that its own culture and perspectives might have on others. One example of this was observed

during Stage 2 of the research, when attending the launch of an Anglican initiative to promote greater dialogue between churches and diverse community groups in one area. This launch involved mainly white Anglican men making speeches using obscure Anglican terminology referring to particular Anglican concerns, without translating these or making them relevant to the rest of the audience, whilst referring to the initiative as providing a gift of greater understanding to the wider churches. Another example was the contested attempt by a liberal Anglican vicar to include everyone in his worldview when presenting his faith alongside a Sufi Muslim and humanist at the Inter-Cultural Leadership School, resulting in a rather heated exchange.

This curious dynamic, rooted in the Anglican church's historic position, represented itself in the UMTP case study in a number of ways, having profound implications for both their own way of dealing with their historical tradition during a period of change, and in their approaches to more modern community work practice concepts such as 'empowerment' (discussed more fully below). The clergy themselves frequently saw the churches' role in this context to continue to be part of the establishment, but in doing this to be on the side of the relatively-powerless local people.

This approach to practice manifested itself several times during the research through particular comments, interventions and decisions. These will be discussed more fully below in the section addressing issues

of participation and empowerment. An illustrative example was the situation observed where one of the clergy team was attending the management committee meeting of a local voluntary group. During the meeting, it became apparent that this group was lacking information about the outcome of a particular approach to a statutory body regarding funding. In this situation, the member of clergy offered to raise the issue informally 'over a glass of wine' when he next saw the officer concerned socially. This was an example of the sort of intervention made possible by the vicar's continued social positioning which was not necessarily available to other people in the area. The continuing dynamic observed was the use of this position to raise the profile and needs of local people in order that they were heard at a similar level to other more privileged groups, who might have similar informal access to decision-makers by virtue of their class, networks or relationships.

Overall, all aspects of UMTP's work appeared to be thoroughly embedded in Anglican structures, norms, expectations and systems, with the particularities of Anglican church culture intimately interwoven with these potentially class-centred differentials. Beyond this particular social positioning, the clergy recognised that even their continued presence in the area was dependent on particular traditional Anglican cultural understandings and practices. In particular, the national organisational structure based on a universal parish system was seen as

making a significant contribution to enabling the church to retain a continued presence in areas such as this one. The Anglican commitment to a parish system and related structures helped ensure a universal church presence in every area of the country, by in effect requiring and facilitating cross-parish subsidy from richer to poorer areas. Without this, staff members argued that it would be easier for a denomination to employ a strategy of focusing on areas where they had successful churches, and withdrawing from areas such as this where congregational resistance, declining attendance and low levels of income make retaining their continuing presence through providing additional community and church development support particularly challenging on both an economic and organisational level. Indeed, this had been observed in this local area, and was a critique recognised by another denomination which had adopted this strategy in earlier interviews.

However, the social connotations and consequent cultural expectations resulting from this particular juxtaposition of a traditionally-established and privileged social role with their intervention and continuing attempts to build relationships with local people were not always so positive. On several occasions during the fieldwork, respondents considered this to be potentially more problematic, contributing towards barriers between the churches and other local people. Thus, many of the barriers which will now be discussed involve a similar combination of cultural differences on at least two levels – differences in expectations

arguably linked to class, and differences due to the specific peculiarities of an Anglican Church culture which had repeatedly appeared influential throughout the research.

One aspect frequently arising in the dialogue during this stage of the fieldwork was the different expectations concerning whether local people engaging with the church should conform to certain established ways of participating. One example of this was a debate referred to between staff team members over whether attending a regular confirmation class at the same time over a number of weeks was necessary if a person wished to formally join the worshipping community through a public expression of their faith. This expectation (which is not mentioned anywhere in the Bible, nor practised by many other denominations) proved problematic for individuals and families from the immediate area whose lives were arranged in a more irregular or even chaotic way. One staff member particularly expressed concern about these clashes in cultural norms between life on the estates and the middle-class-centred church, recognising that "There is a huge tension between experience of church and how church needs to be and the reality of people's lives in Byker", and seeing his missionary role as

bringing these diverse experiences together.[50] This missionary role was seen by this member of staff as involving the attempted engagement and transmission/communication of a set of understandings across cultures. Within this, the critical factor in the success or failure of the attempted communication becomes the ability to listen to feedback, and find appropriate bases and symbols for generating common understanding.

Additional aspects of this traditional Anglican culture being manifested included, for example, the broader UMTP governance structure which held the project together. UMTP as a whole was managed by a Management Committee consisting of various people from within the local Anglican structures, from a reasonably senior level, including the four incumbent clergy, together with limited parish and ecumenical representation. Nominally, the Management Committee included places for four lay representatives and three ecumenical representatives, although in practice this was rather depleted at the meeting attended. A separate Parishes' Advisory Group included broader lay congregational

---

[50] Theoretically, such perspectives related closely to the critiques of Anglican culture offered by Hasler (2006), as discussed in Chapter 3. This is not, however, just an issue for the Anglican church - both Donovan (2003) and Newbigin (1989), amongst others, note how historical church cultures and practices can become culturally-embedded to the extent that they struggle to see the impact that cultural influences have had in shaping the form of their beliefs and practices.

representation, but (as the name suggests) played a more advisory role, with the Management Committee retaining the decision-making power. At one heavily-jargonised UMTP Management Committee meeting attended, the numerous references by many participants to particular 'insider' information, networks, committees, decision-makers and structures facilitated their ability to engage effectively with the wider body of the Anglican Church, over issues as diverse as housing allocations for project staff and future funding/development potential. This again demonstrated the embeddedness of the project in its host culture, which was a positive asset in sustaining its work and its potential to change the wider church around it. However, in doing so, it created an environment (in this case, in its management meetings) which could potentially be very exclusive and prevent/limit the project's ability to include local people or anyone from outside this particular culture in the management and ownership of the project.

This quickly became apparent even in the observations of one of the churches' Annual General Meetings, which conveyed a rather different tone. Here, local people were in a clear majority of attendees, even filling key posts such as Chair and Secretary. However, despite this, the local people in attendance expressed confusion at several points during the meeting with the board-model structures and style of proceedings. One example of this was over the precise church rules regarding the allowed length of service for Church Wardens, and who determined

these. Another cause for confusion was the splitting of the meeting into separate parts with names like the 'vestry meeting' and 'annual parochial church meeting', with technical differences between who might attend and what matters might be covered by each different part of the meeting. At these points, the senior clergy present made numerous contributions to plan and direct the course of the meeting, interpreting broader legal and church requirements by applying them to this context. This reinforced the clergy role within the event.

This in turn exacerbates the clergy-centric nature of Anglican culture, which was a key theme frequently referred to throughout the research. This was illustrated in several ways, not least in terms of the aspiration for each congregation to "have its own priest" being a primary driver for initial congregational engagement in the project. The clergy themselves had a contradictory relationship with this ascribed role, relying on the resulting authority in many ways to carry out their duties, whilst occasionally critiquing local members of one congregation for becoming too dependent on it and holding the attitude "We can't do anything without a priest". Even at the broader UMTP Board meeting, the project remained clergy-centric in terms of leadership; for example, at the beginning of the meeting, the chair's opening comment was "It's a good job I'm not one of those people who wants to control the agenda – I've not seen it before the meeting!".

Having a paid professional clergyperson is, however, just one aspect of the weight of these historical ways of doing and being church that shaped the cultural possibilities of engagement by this project. Potentially, the long and rich history and tradition of the Anglican Church's engagement offers a rich resource for action and reflection which enables the church to take an alternative perspective which is perhaps less dependent on changing current trends and fads, whether in public policy, community work, or understandings of church. At the same time, reflection on contemporary experience and changing society, not least by considering how God may already be active outside the church, requires being open to the possibility of challenging, changing and adapting. This dynamic, which at first glance may seem to destabilise, was certainly leading to the project generating a range of critical challenges to the established ways of doing and understanding things.

In practice, the net impact of this openness to challenge (which was expressed organisationally by creating deliberative spaces to reflect on the potential learning they could offer) actually seemed to have a stabilising effect. Recognising and affirming the potential contribution of the historical and traditional, whilst holding open the possibility and necessity to change in response to changing circumstances, opened up a more honest debate about exactly what might need to change, and how, in which different views could be actively considered from a range of

different perspectives. For example, one congregation member was heard saying "You've got to change, but you don't have to change your belief or your faith".

"What is Church?"

Whilst some recognised this need for change, the institutional weight of historical ways of doing and understanding things in a particular way creates a certain inbuilt bias and inertia towards the status quo. The extent of this is not always consciously apparent. Even when tensions are recognised and reflected on, the result can often be a dilemma about how to balance competing demands and expectations, especially concerning the nature of church itself. This was reflected in multiple discussions throughout this stage of the research which raised the question "what is church?", containing diverse theological perspectives on ecclesiology.[51]

Two examples provide an illustration of the kinds of dilemmas which were observed to result from this state of affairs. The first relates to the experimental half-hour family services being held monthly at St. Michael's shop-front premises. The shorter format, later time, more participative nature, accessible language, etc. were all perceived as

---

[51] Again, these reflect extensive debates within theological literature, as mentioned within Chapter 3.

being central to its ability to attract and include people who do not participate in church services at any other time in the month. However, the external organisational requirement for these services to follow Anglican liturgical frameworks substantially limited the potential flexibility, and the permission for flexibility that was formally obtained was dependent on officially-sanctioned alternative forms of service, such as those in approved 'New Patterns for Worship' form (see Church of England, 2002). The necessity of including particular patterns, structures, and elements to the service (including creeds and particular prayers) limited the time and space available for more participative and flexible forms. As a result, even this experimental attempt to respond to local circumstances was at best "well contained within an Anglican framework", as one staff member described it. When this member of staff was asked about how flexible this made the resulting response, the indicative reply was "It depends on how Anglican I'm being!". These requirements were not always completely rigid; in some cases, aspects of national policy included elements of local discretion, such as the flexibility of each Parochial Church Council to waive the requirement for church wardens to stand down after 6 years, and the flexibility granted by the Bishop for children to receive communion in the new St. Martin's Centre.

The second example was manifest in the dilemmas being discussed during a Reader[52] training session hosted by St. Michael's Church. This involved the 'on location' presentation of some of the work taking place at St. Michael's shop-front premises to a group of parishioners from across the diocese who were training to become Readers for their local church. These trainee Readers were essentially those in the process of becoming lay leaders within their own congregations. When faced with the different experiences being presented by those involved in St. Michael's Church, they began asking frank questions about how their historically-received traditions and understandings of the nature of church might relate to these experiences.   After beginning with discussing the different ideas of 'sacred space' referred to earlier in this

---

[52] "Readers are lay people who are trained and authorized to preach and teach in ... a "pastoral context". ... Reader ministry is the only lay ministry in the Church of England that is authorized by the Canons (the laws) of the church. 100 years ago there were some 20,000 stipendiary (that is paid) clergy in the church and just 1,000 Readers--now there are fewer than 10,000 stipendiary clergy and more than 10,200 active Readers... Readers preach, teach and lead services. They read the lessons, pray, administer the bread and wine, take communion to the sick and housebound, publish the banns of marriage in the absence of a priest. They conduct funerals, visit people in their homes, help with baptism, confirmation and marriage preparation and offer such other assistance as the Bishop directs." (Nappin, 2006:1). For further information, see http://www.readers.cofe.anglican.org/info.php .

chapter, the trainee readers began asking pertinent pragmatic questions about whether/how such "fresh expressions" of church might be financially sustainable. Failing to keep faith with traditional expressions was seen by some of the trainee Readers to be highly problematic, as it would be a "treacherous betrayal" to "let down" people who were "in the old ways of working", especially when these people essentially provided the subsidy which enabled this newer activity to happen.

The trainee Readers were somewhat reassured to find out that this congregation did pay its 'parish share', the contribution determined using a central formula to decide on an affordable contribution from each parish, because "we need to make new committed Christians who pay their share to cover expenses", and in particular, the priest's wages. Whilst UMTP staff recognised the issues of financial sustainability, they were keen to emphasise that mission was not just about "getting people just for cash", highlighting how this sort of activity may raise questions about whether all the old forms of church (such as the particular clergy model) are needed as churches change, and whether new forms of church (which could be less clergy and/or large old building dependent) should necessarily be expected to contribute towards traditional church running costs. The St. Michael's parishioner emphasised the role of God in these processes, and the need to be willing to let go of even dearly-held traditions: "If Jesus is at the centre [of the new developments], God will change hearts ... He says in His Word we've got to lay everything

before him". As a result, a case was made for being "loosely church", or "a church with fuzzy edges", in which opportunities for interaction required flexibility – the issue was whether this was just flexibility at the margins, or whether interaction was allowed to raise difficult questions which struck at the heart of the nature of the church as a group organised around particular beliefs, symbols and cultures.

This was contrasted with other examples from the group's own experiences. One example given was the frequent infant baptisms which other churches carried out, to which families of the baby to be baptised tended to turn up bringing their "fags and cans of beer", sharing the same physical space and church service with existing members, but without the two groups connecting with each other. At this point, one of the readers also recounted their experience of setting up alternative community provision, which had avoided all these difficult issues by following the standard separation trajectory, but as a result had failed to change, grow or adapt, and was facing terminal decline.

During an in-depth interview carried out at another point in the fieldwork, one of the clergy team questioned more radically whether existing congregations were capable of change, despite their rhetoric to the contrary. In his view, this was because congregations are reluctant to let go of the past, and don't want to be the ones to stop being the carriers of received tradition. For this member of the clergy, the need to change had theological resonances with the central Christian

understanding of the need for death in order to change and receive new life, a central concept of the faith rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ. At the same time, he recognised that the established church was providing a massive amount of resources to set up projects such as theirs, and hence felt he had to ask the question "Is this what people are putting money in the [collection] plate for?".

In these circumstances, the clergy/community worker has to respond to the tension between the historical and present embodiment of their faith and values, whilst aiming to create an environment where these may be even more fully realised. They are also expected to keep affiliation with an institutional organisation whose historical and contemporary diversity has led to agreed common forms and practices of faith being a binding element. In this particular Episcopal setting, the difficult role of mediating between central and local church structures becomes focused on the clergy/community worker, in addition to all the other complex roles, demands and expectations that they face. In the integrated UMTP model, the clergy role frequently shared much resemblance with community workers' roles as observed elsewhere, but with the separate expectations being combined together in one person. This hybrid role clearly presented challenges for the clergy themselves too in managing the changing expectations, which they had sought to do through the team structure (see the section below on different understandings of church development and community engagement).

Challenging Bureaucratic Professional Norms

The challenge may not always be just to the traditional church culture or clergy role – indeed, there were examples during the observation where the church's practice challenged established professional norms and practices whilst learning from them.

An example of this is in the way St. Michael's shop-front premises had chosen to implement policies to make their after-school children's sessions work successfully in the local culture. Rather than providing formal after-school 'care' provision, they had adopted a 'drop-in' model for 9 to 12 year olds which took place between 3pm and 4.30pm each weekday during term time, based on an original imperative to "be here, and see what happened".

The church had been very careful to take into account child protection and welfare concerns in organising the provision, including ensuring that the session was always staffed by two members of staff or volunteers, whose records had been checked with the Criminal Records Bureau. The session was organised in an open way, with the activities taking place in the shop front premises clearly visible to the large numbers of people passing by the large glass windows (with blinds always open). Despite this, they were acutely aware that some professionals would see them as "sailing close to the wind" and "taking a risk" in letting groups of children come into the building without first securing parental consent.

forms. However, in many ways, this initial informality was seen as essential to the church's ability to successfully establish the relationships with groups of children and develop the clear sense of ownership which the children now had (illustrated by the respect shown in taking care of the building and generally responding to staff requests, even if their behaviour sometimes led to "hairy" situations, and the children's demands for explanations if any particular session had to be cancelled.) From this basis, they could then seek to build relationships with parents too, without excluding children of parents who did not relate to (or could not read) written bureaucratic forms.

This section has highlighted both the opportunities and the barriers arising from this project's engagement with their own tradition and cultural roots, which differed in many ways from the particular emphases and frameworks influencing the actions of practitioners and projects from other backgrounds (whether denominationally, culturally, professionally, etc.).[53] The purpose of this is not to exemplify or vilify any particular denominational or other approach as 'good practice' or 'bad practice' – instead, it highlights how it is necessary for practitioners to engage critically and reflectively on their own particular

---

[53] For some other earlier case studies by another researcher where the cultural and religious contours have had similarly profound impacts on practice, see Harris (1998).

circumstances and influences, drawing on a wide range of sociological, theological and professional practice theories to recognise and respond to these, if they are to be able to work as effective change-agents in this setting.

3. Empowerment

Much of the above evidence also begins to paint a picture of the complex relationship between the historically-received role/position of the church and its understanding and capacity to engage in empowering practice. Historically-received patterns of relationships (e.g. between clergy and local parishioners or local government officers) combine with particular practices (e.g. borrowed board-room formats, professionalised expectations and roles) and specialist jargon (e.g. the particular theological and organisational terms used within this denomination) to become entwined symbolically and culturally in ways which become difficult to disentangle, but relate in complex ways to analyses of power.

For example, in the 'glass of wine' example given earlier, a member of the clergy team interceded socially and informally to address power differentials caused by restricted access to networks, social situations and decision-making arenas. Contrary to this strategy, UMTP was also observed to be very active in promoting locally-led initiatives to ensure local people's perspectives were taken into account in decision making, and more generally in challenging current power configurations.

A prime example of this occurred when one clergy team member attended a planning day organised by the local authority designed to consider the future local plans for implementing the government's 'Surestart' initiative for children under five and their families. Accordingly, various 'partner' stakeholders had been included in the day to prepare their annual strategy. However, the session observed had clearly been structured around the framework provided in Government guidance. The main activity involved asking questions linked to this framework in an attempt to produce sentences for the annual plan which demonstrated how local efforts were proceeding in the direction set by central government. Into this government-driven discourse, parents frequently asked pointed questions highlighting the way certain views, such as those of the children, were being ignored in the process. The initial response taken by the officer leading the workshop acknowledged these comments in passing, before trying to sideline them into the margins of the final report because they didn't address the provided framework. At this point, an intervention by the member of UMTP staff present to bring the discussion back to what had been said by the mothers present, validate their contribution, and ask pertinent questions of the strategy in terms with professional references that were hard for the lead officer to ignore, all added significant weight to the mothers' contributions, with the net result being that their views were taken

much more seriously in the subsequent analysis and in developing action points for the strategy.

This situation illustrates the curious position of UMTP in relation to empowerment (reflective of broader debates on the notion summarised in collections such as Humphries, 1996) – it seems to rely on a pragmatic assessment of current power relations which requires a currently powerful professional to 'empower' another, rather than considering people's own capacity to organise themselves. There were various dimensions which potentially contributed to the power dynamics in this group exchange. Some of those present were paid professionals, with characteristic access to privileged knowledge and status, epitomised in their occasional casual use of jargon and reference to particular networks to justify their position. The position of the UMTP staff member as the only paid professional who was completely independent of the complex web of funding and accountability structures increasingly endemic to these local partnership arrangements made his contribution pivotal. In addition, the lead local authority officer and the UMTP staff member were, in this instance, the only two men in the room, with their voices seeming to carry more weight in setting the tone and direction of the discussion.

In other respects, UMTP staff were observed as adopting a more reactionary approach to 'empowerment' perspectives based on what was in their view a naïve promotion of the rights of individuals to declare

their own needs, such as in one member of staff's critique of a study carried out by a youth worker to find out what local young people might want from the new St. Martin's Centre when it opened.

Another aspect of this was the description by one of the clergy of their role as being 'middle-down', rather than 'top-down' or 'bottom-up', based on a critique of what he saw as "uncritical bottom-up thinking", given that the "way local communities have developed [around here] has been deeply self-disenabling".

However, in various ways, UMTP was observed to be taking a more proactive role in relation to empowerment, by supporting groups to develop independent alliances, responses and actions that addressed perceived power imbalances over the longer term. In doing this, UMTP frequently acted on the interface between these and the existing powerful institutional stakeholders. In addition, the project itself could in some ways be seen as an empowering form of practice, being based on original aims and intended outcomes which were referred to as "a distillation of what had been heard from parishioners", to which resources and support had been allocated from diocese and deanery level.

These somewhat paradoxically related stances perhaps reflected the different positioning of the different team members in relation to traditionally established power relations and structures, but also

highlight a tension (albeit potentially a creative one) in the ongoing

dialogue and development engendered by the change process in this

context. This central tension was summarised by one of the clergy in

terms linked to Christian understandings of liberation by their continuing

reflection on the question "Are we setting people free or making them

dependent?". However, in engaging with the difficult issues facing this

particular community, the church clearly needed to wrestle with these

problematic dynamics and work through a reflective analysis, drawing on

social and theological perspectives, in order to decide how best to act.

It is here that further attention was warranted in terms of how the

notions of 'community engagement' and 'church development' were

understood and applied.

4. Different Understandings of 'Community Engagement' and 'Church Development'

We have already noted that, prima facie, this project was unusual for

aiming to explicitly link community engagement and church development

together in a reflective way. However, analysis of the data collected

suggested that this link warranted further attention, particularly as it

became increasingly apparent that there were particular issues arising

from UMTP's definitions of these activities.

Russell (2004:6) helpfully sums up UMTP's initial understanding of these

two terms in the following way: community engagement is referred to

as "co-ordinating church involvement in regeneration structures", whereas church development is referred to as the range of activity including "evangelism, new ways of being church, growth of engagement with the community".

These definitions clashed with my initial interpretation of the terms on initially seeing UMTP's model diagram (see Figure 1 above). My initial interpretation had envisaged community engagement as including "growth of church engagement with the local community, public governance structures and wider civil society organisations", seeing church development as referring to "the internal learning and capacity-building activities which enabled the members of the congregation to individually and collectively reflect, grow, change and adapt to their changing circumstances". By contrast, the UMTP definition of "community engagement" seemingly focuses on engaging not with local people, but instead with public governance structures and other civil society bodies. This also related to the UMTP staffing structure, which had assigned each member of the clergy with a particular one of the three specialisms (community engagement, church development, and theological education). In theory, UMTP's definition could have left the 'church development' role with a particularly challenging brief, including the task of managing several large legal-technical building projects, encouraging internal change, and connecting congregations with the people round about them. In practice, this seemed to have

been managed through staff team members negotiating pragmatically about their respective roles in particular congregations. It was also alleviated in part by the addition of a fourth staff member focusing on mission, but the lack of structural clarity did seem to hamper team work to some degree.

Recognising these different definitions proved to be crucial in interpreting the findings, especially in making sense of the final reflective exchange with the UMTP staff team, when the first draft of this chapter containing an initial analysis of findings was presented. UMTP staff recognised that their previous understanding of 'community engagement' had resulted in an often effective strategic presence in various civil society alliances and local governance structures. However, such engagement had been centred on a previous staff member, who had since departed. The team was now finding that to retain these connections in a sustainable way, more facilitation of congregational engagement with these structures and alliances was needed. (This reflected the earlier findings from Chapter 5 concerning the need for broad congregational involvement to retain the sustainability of this work). In many ways, the observed work of UMTP could still be argued to fit with my initial definitions, and seemed to be helped by reflecting further on how these alternative definitions might fit together.

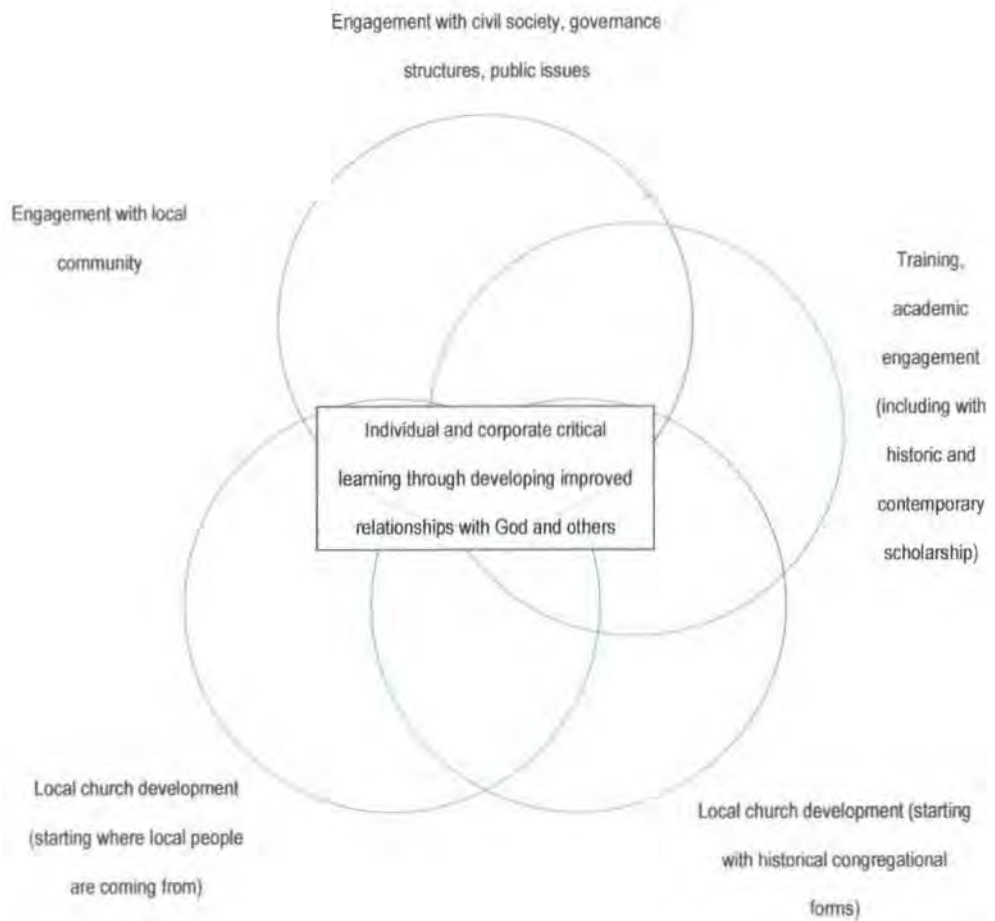## 8.4 Concluding Comments – Developing UMTP's Model For Wider Use

This chapter has highlighted how integrating theological aims, identities and reflection within practice led to UMTP developing organisational structures and practices which challenged many of the prevailing norms and trends previously found in the research. In particular, by explicitly including and valuing the diverse strands of tradition, culture and theology within 'a broad church', the project was able to learn from these and apply them in new ways to address the changing context. However, in bringing these strands together, there was a conscious effort not just to assimilate differences, nor deny the need for change. Instead, the community work engaged in here was facilitated to engage the congregation, staff, and even the public and other agencies, in reflection on the churches' purposes and how they related to their theology. Doing this had helped congregation members to apply their faith in ways which were more relevant to the surrounding area, putting their faith into practice in ways which made more sense to others whilst not losing their own sense of identity in the process. This created a number of different hybrid spaces, which UMTP had originally envisaged as being the overlapping spaces between their three aims of church development, community engagement and theological education as represented in Figure 1.

Perhaps the alternative possible drawings of the boundaries between community engagement and church development roles (discussed at the end of this chapter) actually point to the need to further develop the ground-breaking rationale behind this original model. In terms of the broader thesis analysis, as well as the local case study analysis, an amended model can potentially refine the contested understandings of purpose which shape the involvement of churches and individual Christians in community work. In theological terms, a holistic model is needed which can address the involvement of Christians individually or corporately within community work, and relate this to what in theological terms might be called their mission.

This UMTP case study has shown how there can be separate, but highly inter-related, aspects to the manifestation of this mission in the contemporary social and political context. These dimensions include not just enabling existing church members to learn, grow and develop in their faith in isolation from 'the world'; nor just concentrating on trying to recruit new members to perpetuate an existing social institution; nor just developing a political theology to critique the current social order. In and of themselves, taken individually, these aspects result in parodies of church which can have negative long-term consequences. Instead, the critical learning happening in this case study seemed to be happening at the intersections between efforts to develop five rather

than three dimensions of this project's work, as Figure 2 tentatively illustrates.

Figure 2: A Refined Model of Christian Community Work

Engagement with civil society, governance structures, public issues

Engagement with local community

Training, academic engagement (including with historic and contemporary scholarship)

Individual and corporate critical learning through developing improved relationships with God and others

Local church development (starting where local people are coming from)

Local church development (starting with historical congregational forms)

This model shows that Christian community work, as illustrated in the UMTP example, can involve the creation of more than one type of hybrid space. Indeed, its strength lies in connecting the different purposes highlighted in the different dimensions of the diagram together.

Central to the whole endeavour is a process of individual and corporate critical learning which arises out of the connections made through the hybrid spaces enabled by the work. However, this learning cannot be understood in isolation from the individual people and groups involved, nor can it remain Christian without being centred on a relationship with the triune God. This also highlights the centrality of critical practical theological reflection to Christian community work, in enabling the links between these dimensions to be explored.

Thus, the learning process required by Christian community work is fundamentally relational, concerned with developing improved relationships with God and others, whichever dimension is concerned. This includes the potential of learning more about God *through* each other, including through the diverse understandings of practice, diverse theological understandings, diverse identities, and diverse collective insights preserved within the living expression of historically-embedded cultures.

This is not to say that all understandings are necessarily on a par with each other or equally true. Nor is it to say that a specific value base and

an acknowledgement of the identities and differences involved are not required for practitioners to facilitate this process. The earlier parts of this thesis have highlighted the difficulties arising from such a position. Nor is it to say, at the opposite extreme, that any one particular human theological expression or understanding can ever capture the fullness of God. These issues will be considered further in the overall thesis conclusion provided in Chapter 9. Furthermore, nor is it to suggest that the particular UMTP approach in terms of staffing and structure should be universally adopted, in some parody of the standardised approaches critiqued earlier.

Instead, the particular challenge in the contemporary English context appears to be creating and making the most of the opportunities for engagement and learning which exist by reflecting anew in each setting, but with a clearer understanding of the purpose and value base for this work. This requires a sustained critical reflection drawing on the full diversity of historical and contemporary theological understandings. This reflection is required to inform (but not constrain) the ability of local churches to regenerate themselves and proclaim the "faith... afresh in each generation" (Church of England, 2000:xi) through fluid but contiguous expressions of church which connect and communicate fully with all those around.

As this example has shown, practitioners involved in community work can play a central role in this process, when operating within a supportive structure.

The challenge of this setting is that Christian community workers often find themselves working "in and against" traditional forms of church, supporting and promoting them whilst challenging them to change in relationship to those around them. This potential for conflict arising from the work adds to the complexity of Christian community work roles, whilst creating new commonalities with other community workers, such as those employed by the state, for whom the phrase 'in and against' was originally coined.[54]

Nevertheless, despite the potential uncomfortableness of this position, this position holds within it a particular potential to create creative spaces that link these different aspects of the church's mission together at a grassroots level, in an outward-facing but reflective process of growth.

---

[54] See London to Edinburgh Weekend Group, 1980, for the original usage of this phrase. A more recent application and exploration of these dilemmas within a local authority setting can be found in Banks and Orton, 2005.

In doing so, churches such as those involved in UMTP appear to be regenerating their own role through being what Ashdown (2005) refers to as "grassroots urban institutions"[55] in a changing society.

---

[55] Clearly (although this sometimes appears forgotten in urban theological literature), the church is capable of playing a similarly important role within rural areas, as shown by the studies cited in Section 3.3, including Farnell et al (2006), the Churches Regional Commission in Yorkshire and the Humber (2003) and the Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas (1990). However, Ashdown's work on churches in urban contexts is cited here because of its particular relevance to this project, especially in combining a discussion of theological diversity with aspects of traditional institutional resilience.

Chapter 9: Conclusion - Towards developing an improved theory base for Christian community work

9.1 Introduction

This chapter will conclude the thesis by drawing together the research findings and considering their implications for developing an improved understanding of 'good practice' in this context. To do this, the chapter will first summarise the conclusions from each part of the thesis in turn, highlighting the connections between the themes presented within each chapter. Having done this, the chapter will set these findings within the context of a theoretical framework of individual and organisational learning which offers the potential of additional insights on the data outlined. Building on this understanding, the chapter will highlight the implications of the research findings for developing an improved understanding of 'good practice' in this context, together with recommendations for the different parties involved.

9.2 A Summary of the Thesis Findings Overall

In this thesis, I have presented the findings from a research journey undertaken to explore faith, dialogue and difference in English Christian

community work. This section summarises this journey by showing how the conclusions reached at each section of the research developed into the overall analysis presented.

I began by highlighting several possible meanings of difference within community work practice, including difference as diversity of practice, difference as contestation of practice and difference as 'the other'. The dialogue element of the title arose from considering the relationships within and between these dimensions in more detail. By providing a background to the personal experience which had raised the questions leading to this study, the research then began by setting the research in a reflexive context at the outset, before going on to consider substantial themes from previous related studies.

Internationally, despite earlier predictions that secularisation would diminish the role of religion in society, this literature demonstrated that faith still has a significant international impact, not least in terms of social action. The effects of this impact have continued to be felt by states, groups and individuals in myriad, often controversial, and even contradictory, ways. The contours of this impact have in turn been shaped by related concepts such as liberal pluralism and 'race', which have themselves been introduced in response to perceived socio-political problems surrounding difference.

Despite this changing context, various studies show that faith continues to have a significant impact throughout both international development and changing Western social welfare models, as well as in international situations of conflict and peace-building.

In the English context, against the backdrop of a significant historical Christian contribution to social welfare, churches are facing substantial social, economic, political and theological challenges. In response to these challenges, churches are increasingly exploring ways that might enable them to reconnect with the wider public. This has led to an increased awareness of the diverse ways that churches are involved in community work, working out various theological understandings of mission in the process. By contrast, government agendas have increasingly sought to involve 'faith communities' in response to their own agendas concerning outsourced service delivery, community cohesion, tackling discrimination, addressing social/political exclusion, and improving national security. The pragmatic compromises resulting from the meeting of these church and government agendas have led to substantial activity, but there are signs of strain in the relationship between them.

I found evidence of different dynamics affecting this work at different levels as a result of this changing context. At an organisational level, the diverse agendas frequently contributed to changes in the governance and ownership of Christian community work projects over time. Whilst

such changes had diverse rationales, they frequently led to Christian community work projects collapsing back inwards into the founding congregation/s or alternatively separating from these congregations entirely.

Such trajectories were found to be problematic because they led to the loss of the shared, hybrid spaces for encounter which Christian community work created between different people and groups, not least between church congregations and the wider public. The challenges to traditional identities represented by such spaces led to high levels of contestation over their potential distinctiveness. However, an analysis of the data from this research indicated that their distinctiveness lay within their diverse theological influences. These influences created a particular contribution to civil society because of the way that they connect theological worldviews with a faith-based motivation for individual and corporate social action, grounded in personal and social identity. In addition, this action is supported by the church as an established community of interest, with its own pre-existing organisational framework, resources and long-lasting commitments to those who are most disadvantaged. The loss of organisational connections with founding churches by Christian community work projects, when combined with changing individual roles, funding pressures, and a failure to maintain theological reflection on the organisation's work, is important because it leads to a loss of this

distinctiveness. Moreover, it can also contribute to a loss of those hybrid spaces or "fuzzy edges" where congregations collectively interact with other groups and wider society. The net result is the eventual loss of significant spaces where encounters between people who hold different worldviews can happen, and a significant limitation on the learning which does take place in the meantime.

These issues were found to be exacerbated by the different approaches to constructing notions of 'good practice' that were being deployed to deal with the increasing awareness of diversity within Christian community work practice. Three particular approaches were outlined from the data, characterised as being: 'whatever is appropriate' to local circumstances, based on discretion; finding 'common ground' through terminology which transcends other differences; and standardisation masquerading as professionalisation. However, there were underlying limitations to each of these approaches which meant that practitioners experienced substantial difficulties when trying to apply them in practice. Without a more developed theory regarding the purpose of the work, together with a clear understanding of a value base which might inform practitioners' choices between practice alternatives, practitioners frequently struggled to resolve the many dilemmas encountered. Moreover, in the attempt to be 'neutral', those approaches which just used common language and/or standardised frameworks to deal with these dilemmas risked being hi-jacked by

smuggled-in agendas. Especially in situations of cultural, religious and political diversity, practitioners were shown to need to start by acknowledging rather than suppressing difference, if they were to respond effectively to the dilemmas that diversity presented. A crucial part of this process was found to involve practitioners gaining the ability to reflect more deeply on their own identity and worldview, including any theological perspectives that might inform these. This shifted the focus from the development of an abstract notion of 'good practice' to the central importance of developing 'good practitioners' who can continually engage in this reflection. However, incorporating faith within professional education and development activities was shown to involve complex challenges. One of the most significant of these challenges was how best to facilitate practitioners to develop deeper reflection on their own practice which took into account identity issues and enabled students to include (rather than polarise) faith within their reflective practice development.

Finally, a case study of an innovative project was considered which initially appeared to challenge the above conclusions. The findings from this case study showed evidence which confirmed the broader conclusions. This case study also helped to refine the overall analysis of potential relationships between the different dimensions of Christian community work practice, not least between practitioner, project, public and church. In doing so, a clearer understanding of purpose was

proposed which placed individual and corporate critical learning through developing improved relationships with God and others at the centre of this practice.

9.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

When considered together, these conclusions highlight the recurrent theme of learning within the community worker's practice, and the significance of this theme in building relationships and reflecting on faith identities and understandings.   Having reached the conclusion that learning is so significant in understanding these findings, this section begins highlighting some of the potential implications arising from this conclusion and begins to make connections with broader theory which could help to develop these implications further through additional research.   In the process, some specific recommendations for each of the various stakeholders identified in the research are also made, before a final conclusion is provided.

Implications (1): Developing a Clearer Understanding of Purpose

Based on these findings, what are the implications that can be drawn from this research?   In particular, what might be a potential starting point for developing an improved understanding of 'good practice' within Christian community work?

Firstly, and most importantly, it is crucial that all of those with some interest in Christian community work recognise that it is fundamentally concerned with spaces that are necessarily hybrid or shared spaces, where difference in all its senses is frequently encountered on a regular basis. Without an understanding of Christian community work that can cope with difference more explicitly, practitioners and related organisations are left with no adequate means of acknowledging and facilitating learning from their everyday encounters which involved such differences. Such difficulties also leave practitioners with no clear basis for determining how they should respond when they encountered difference themselves, often leading to them experiencing profound dilemmas about the nature, purpose and methods of their work.

Furthermore, without developing a more adequate theory base at both organisational and individual practice levels, it is important to recognise that the work experiences continual crises of character, confusions of method and dilemmas of purpose. These crises and dilemmas are exacerbated by political, theological and personal manoeuvrings which frequently seek to define the work in a much narrower way, thus avoiding the potential threat to vested interests and established identities that critical questioning might present.

Given this contestation and confusion in current Christian community work practice, is there any hope of finding a more adequate theoretical

basis that may contribute towards understanding and resolving the dilemmas highlighted above?

If we are to do so, it seems essential to address directly the contentious issues of aims and purpose that are largely avoided by many of the current approaches. This requires first acknowledging and dealing with the full diversity of practice aims, methods, values and theologies involved. However, in acknowledging these, they should not necessarily be considered to be mutually exclusive. Indeed, an important part of the findings is the way that some of these different aims, methods, values and theologies are being combined in various hybrid ways. An important part of this dynamic is the way that such combinations are themselves related to different understandings of 'church'. The developing work of Baker (Baker, 2003; Baker and Skinner, 2005a, 2005b; Baker, 2007b) on the 'hybrid church' and 'spiritual capital'/'religious capital' is particularly interesting and useful for taking these theoretical implications further forward. However, a theoretical base for practice needs to go further than just providing an analysis of how Christian community work might fit with prevailing socio-political theoretical ideas such as social capital, and its theologically-related derivatives, religious or spiritual capital. Whilst such ideas have begun to capture elements of the distinctiveness argument outlined in this thesis, by themselves they do not provide a rationale or basis for Christian

community work practice, beyond stating what it might contribute to broader society and why.

A theoretical base for Christian community work practice also needs to go beyond prevailing policy concerns such as devolved public service delivery, in order to find an alternative theoretical basis less dependent on changing political discourses and stakeholder agendas. In doing so, this theoretical base would also need to avoid falling into the broader trap identified by Wilson for religion in the 21st century. This trap is that of being part of a trend towards "an increasing displacement of the moral by the rational and the technical" (Wilson, 1982:165) which leaves many systemic aspects labelled with the "rhetoric of community" but lacking the value-systems embodied in relationships that define its form. Religious functionaries, Wilson argues, may traditionally work to different criteria which "are diffuse, and coterminous with all that is human", inherently valuing people as ultimate-ends-in-themselves, not just as means to achieving more systematized goals. If this is true, and potentially part of the "distinctive contribution" that faith can bring to this work, then we clearly need to rethink any approach that aims to achieve this through purely standardised, rationalistic, bureaucratic means.

Based on the analysis provided in this thesis, an alternative theoretical basis can be proposed which may provide a more research-rooted foundation for Christian community work practice. This alternative

theoretical base builds on a foundation of understanding Christian community work as a relational and dialogical process of informal education. This process, articulated well by Smith (1994), requires an initial recognition of the need to uphold the integrity of both the practitioner and those with whom they work, whilst also recognising that the nature of learning is that it can and should lead to growth and change. It also involves a rediscovery of the concept of 'truth' – not the simplified and partial 'truth' of one personal or traditional perspective, but of education as the process whereby we create a space where the pursuit of truth can be practised in community (Palmer, 1998).

Palmer's theoretical work on learning and teaching provides an understanding of truth grounded within a broadly critical realist framework which has much to offer a developing theory base for Christian community work. Within his work, truth within the educational process is not "lodged in the conclusions we reach about objects of knowledge ...[which often change as knowledge develops] but as the passionate and disciplined [ongoing] process of inquiry and dialogue itself" (1998:104) as we seek to better understand subjects relating to the world around us. Central to this process is Palmer's notion of a "community of truth", in which truth is "the passionate and disciplined process of inquiry and dialogue itself, as the dynamic conversation of a community that keeps testing old conclusions and coming into new

ones." (1998:104). For Palmer, knowing the current conclusions only gets us:

> "in on the conversation. ... To be in the truth, we must know how to observe and reflect and speak and listen, with passion and discipline, in the circle gathered around a given subject. .... The firmest foundation of all our knowledge is the community of truth itself. This community can never offer us ultimate certainty – not because its process is flawed but because certainty is beyond the grasp of finite hearts and minds. Yet this community can do much to rescue us from ignorance, bias, and self-deception if we are willing to submit out assumptions, our observations, our theories – indeed, ourselves – to its scrutiny." (p.104)

In this view of education as both a pedagogical and spiritual process of personal and social growth, Palmer argues that "we honour both the little stories of our lives and the big stories of the disciplines" by starting from a position that recognises and values the identity and integrity of all involved (Palmer, 1998:76; Smith, 2005), including their diverse worldviews.

Hence, this process is not just about learning, but also about connecting this process of learning with our own identities and relationships with others. Understanding the purpose of Christian community work in terms of this kind of informal education means that a central aspect of

their practice becomes about building relationships and enabling understanding between difference:

> "The goal of a knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds. A knowledge born of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but at reconciling the world to itself. The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here, the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entertaining an embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own. In such knowing we know and are known as members of one community, and our knowing becomes a way of reweaving that community's bonds." (Palmer, 1993:8)

Such an encounter begins from a full acknowledgement of difference, but holds central the search for understanding through dialogue and (perhaps more importantly) relationship. Within such an encounter, different people's worldviews and beliefs can be honoured without abandoning the central commitment of community workers to building shared values – indeed, both different worldviews and shared values remain crucial and integral to the process. Perhaps equally importantly, whilst recognising the importance of beliefs and worldviews, this view of community work starts from an approach to difference which does not treat religious belief as a discrete part of identity that requires separate forums to address, but instead as an integral part of complex personal

and social identities. As a result, it invites dialogue between different aspects of people's individual and social identities, and is less likely to immediately alienate those whose worldviews are not theocentric.

Hence, a relational model of informal education has much potential to offer a developing understanding of the purpose of Christian community work. Such a framework also provides potential connections to explore with other influential theorists within community work who have seen this work as a form of educational practice, not least Freire (1972).

However, this rather idealistic vision of basing community work in building learning through relationships is by itself likely to prove insufficient in handling the difficulties and conflict which such processes frequently generate. The research clearly demonstrated how clashes between different spheres of activity which started in different places (e.g. the traditional church congregation, work with particular excluded groups, etc.) can lead to multiple barriers and complex power dynamics which can inhibit learning and relationship building. Whilst a comprehensive exploration of the potential of this approach and all of the difficulties which may be encountered is beyond the scope of this concluding chapter, further implications from this research can be considered which shed some light on some of the most significant complications that have previously been raised.

Implications (2): Does Informal Education Have a Place Within the Christian Faith?

Traditionally, informal education has met with significant challenges as a basis for community work practice in church-related settings, not least in its contested incorporation in the related field of Christian youth work. Religions are not often seen to encourage people to be critically reflective of the received tradition, belief and practice, seeming to prefer instead a more indoctrination-focused approach that may be thought to produce more passive and compliant adherents (Pugh, 1999). When the primary aim of the congregation is seen as being the creation of more such adherents, informal education can be seen at best to be an ineffective means of achieving this aim, and at worse a dangerous temptation to divert resources from what is seen as the primary task of the community (Ellis, 1990:91). The resulting clash arising from the expectations built on this model can leave faith-based informal educators misunderstood from all sides. At the opposite extreme, for some research respondents, the whole concept of 'evangelism' had become so tainted with the distaste of ideological indoctrination and a colonial imposition of a set package of beliefs that they were left rejecting any place for sharing their own beliefs as part of their work. Arguably in reaction to these views, others saw not speaking of one's beliefs or faith whilst engaged in community work as being tantamount to 'being ashamed of the Gospel' and denying one's own faith.

Even here, in potentially the most divisive of factors in faith-based community work (and certainly the one that most statutory or secular sources were most concerned about), informal education theory may offer a way out of the impasse, in highlighting the act of mutual sharing and relationship at the heart of the education process, and setting this within a critical and ethical framework which seeks to ensure all those involved are open to learning as a result. If effective relationships are to be built between different individuals and groups, a deeper understanding is required than knowing a basic list of 'facts' in order to avoid offending the other. Much more important is to create spaces for voluntary encounter where people can begin to work through a holistic application of their beliefs and be constructively challenged in the process. For Christians, such an approach links closely with an understanding of the nature of theology to be 'faith thinking' (Hart, 1995); i.e. an ongoing process of learning and critically reflecting on God and His purpose in the world, as a necessary part of a broader approach to living and acting in such a way as to make faith relevant and communicable in a local community context which often involves crossing cultural barriers (Reader, 1994; Donovan, 2003). Such a process necessarily involves a person not just reflecting on their own faith and current understanding, but also the understandings and faiths of those who have shared related traditions and Scriptures, and undertaking a process of critical discernment in reflecting on how to apply the

resulting understanding in their own lives. This also opens up the potential for their particular application of their faith to be opened up to external scrutiny, inviting dialogue with those holding different understandings.

Within the process of Christian community work practice, what then is the role and place for God and faith? At the heart of the Christian faith is a triune God epitomising diversity and unity in community, who resolves ethical aspiration and human limitations through grace and incarnational love, inviting all people into full relationship with God and each other. Knowing the full extent of such an infinite God, and being able to express this within a finite language or culture, is beyond the capability of any one individual or group. These implications of these two aspects of the Christian faith make the Christian community worker both humble (in terms of the limited extent to which they can possibly know the fullness of God's truth, mercy and love) and hopeful (that it is possible to discern between competing expressions and discourses claiming the status of being authentically Christian, not least by their fruits).

Seen in such a way, the learning processes associated with Christian community work become central to the life and faith of Christians and churches, rather than being marginal optional extras. In addition, far from being contrary to desired policy outcomes, such approaches may also offer the potential for more sustainable service delivery by churches

and more cohesive interactions supporting greater understanding between different faith groups and wider society. This is because the spaces for interaction created by Christian community work, when supported by relational informal educational methods, can hold within them significant potential for building relational bridges between diverse individuals and groups.

Implications (3): Clarifying Relationships With Other Aims and Frameworks

This is not to say that recognising an informal educational dimension to Christian community work practice necessarily resolves all the tensions between the different agendas, aims, methods and theologies informing this practice. Nor is it to say that this should henceforth be the only framework within which Christian community work is understood. Indeed, this research has clearly shown that suppressing the diversity of practice rationales and aims can be highly problematic. Rather, it is to note that the primary basis for resisting the incorporation of informal education in religion, and incorporating faith-based community work in the life of local communities, has been a confused (and often unresolved) understanding of the aims and methods of this work, and how these aims and methods might fit together within different spaces, times and activities.

An alternative approach begins initially by acknowledging the potential for a diverse array of aims, which may be integrated to varying degrees and in varying ways depending on the understanding and approach of local practitioners and organisations. Having acknowledged this potential for diversity, the work must proceed by taking part in transparent and accountable ongoing debates about its own nature and purpose, in which the practitioner and all the other stakeholders and participants are reflectively involved. The critical approach to difference which has begun to be developed in this thesis offers a starting point for recognising this diversity as a platform to critically explore relationships between diverse aspects of this work. In particular, it highlights the importance of exploring how different practice aims and methods may relate to each other in highly complex ways, including often combining in hybrid spaces.

By their nature, such spaces tend to mix different organisational forms, individual intentions, etc. However, this research has shown how the potential of organisational spaces to enable learning and dialogue (and ultimately sustain themselves) is limited if this mixture is not the starting point for a discussion to clarify how diverse aims and methods may fit together.

Implications (4): Creating Safe, yet Charged, Spaces

This is where a third theoretical complication arises. For learning from diversity to take place, both at the level of organisational governance and at the level of everyday practice, the research emphasised the necessity of creating a particular kind of safe, yet charged, space.

It is within these 'safe spaces' that learning encounters can take place and relationships between people from diverse backgrounds can be built, often enabling improved collective responses to their needs and concerns. These learning spaces will often be creative hybrids between existing political, organisational, theological and individual interests, and it is in enabling relationships and learning to emerge out of the tensions between these that the whole can become more than the sum of its parts.

Critical reflection on the dialogue between the broad range of theological, political, ethical and social discourses outlined in this thesis has begun to highlight some key criteria which are essential components of such 'safe spaces' for learning. These criteria notably include voluntary participation, non-coercion and the need to protect vulnerable people from abuse of any kind. Rather than considering these criteria in terms of essential minimum standards (which can all too easily become operationalised in an inflexible standardised way that can come to inhibit the work), it may be more helpful to think of such criteria as

underpinning principles. This is because even with the basic principles highlighted above, the specific application of these principles to particular local contexts needs to be undertaken carefully, reflectively and accountably, drawing on the collective experience of all those engaged in this work.

It is also important to clarify the meaning of 'safety' as it is used in this context. Across much of the research data, the avoidance of difficult issues involving difference had led to a shallow form of safety for some arising from their disengagement from any arena which might lead their perspectives or identities to be challenged. The fear of encountering and having to deal with difference remained a significant barrier to establishing and maintaining spaces for learning. Clearly, this form of 'safety' (in the sense of an avoidance of any potentially challenging encounter) does not support learning.

This highlights two important tensions which arise from thinking about the process of Christian community work as a form of informal education. Palmer (1998:74) refers to these as "paradoxes" of learning; that learning spaces need to be both "bounded and open", and both "hospitable and charged". Within Christian community work, this thesis led to the proposal of a model which is consistent with Christian community work being seen as a process of informal education, operating in the hybrid spaces between different corporate dimensions of this work and generating learning encounters between them (see

Figure 2 in Chapter 8). The differences and tensions between the different dimensions of practice[56] create a focus for the work which is both bounded (in terms of the initial project or activity that forms the basis of the Christian community work) and open (in terms of the potential for this work to develop in a multitude of ways, depending on the learning that results). The work provides a reason for bringing different people together into a shared space that focuses them on a project in hand which is fundamentally relational. However, at the same time, this space requires a critical engagement with the several dimensions identified, which keep the space 'charged' because of the differences and debates both within and between them.

'Good practice' for the Christian community worker thus becomes essentially about that which facilitates people from within all of these dimensions of practice to learn from each other more deeply *and* work together more effectively towards 'the good'. This places complex

---

[56] These dimensions were summarised as: "Engagement with the local community"; "Engagement with civil society, governance structures, public issues"; "Training, academic engagement (including with historic and contemporary scholarship)"; "Local church development (starting with historical congregational forms)"; and "Local church development, starting where local people are coming from". In the centre, the purpose of Christian community work was seen as enabling "individual and corporate critical learning through developing improved relationships with God and others".

social, ethical and political debates about 'the good' at the centre of this practice. What 'the good' might be and how it might best be achieved attracts substantial debate and differences of opinion, both amongst different groups and within the development of longstanding academic disciplines (Banks, 2004).

By opening the practice of individual practitioners and groups up to making connections with these dimensions of the debate, within the context of their own pursuit, Christian community workers and those they work with become involved in developing a more critically-informed form of practice. Such debates may usefully be informed by secular "standards" or other's attempts to define comprehensively the nature of "good practice", without necessarily becoming subservient to them, or treating them as necessarily being the only end-goal that faith-related practice might aspire towards.

If Christian community work practice is to create spaces which are both 'safe' *and* creatively facilitate learning encounters, a model based on an ostensible professional 'neutrality' and pre-defined standardised rules is profoundly inadequate. This is because such approaches remove the essential ethical/theological debate concerning what contributes to 'the good', and how this might best be achieved, yet rely on facilitating connections between different conceptions of 'the good' to inform their work. This gives rise to practitioner and organisational dilemmas when different conceptions of 'the good' are involved in decision-making over

particular situations, but have no means of being incorporated in the decision-making process.

Finding a place for these debates - indeed, making them central to practice - is essential if faith-related practice is to engage in a critical dialogue with other forms of practice, retaining the capacity to learn from wider developments without losing its own theologically-informed critical or prophetic edge. This has profound implications in terms of the need to make room for theological reflection alongside the other forms of reflection within theoretical models of reflective learning and practice, such as those developed by Kolb (1984) and Schön (1987). In addition, as Schön notes, a reflective model of practice also has substantial implications for the process of educating practitioners. This highlights an important area where more research could usefully be conducted, exploring further how faith might fit within these processes of developing "good practitioners" able to handle these debates.

Implications (5): Understanding the Organisational Dimensions of Learning

It is not just at the level of individual practitioners that these developmental debates are required which recognise the complexity of diverse practice aims, rationales and methods, and explore their connections with faith. Indeed, these debates about the nature of "the

good" and how it relates to learning and practice are equally important on an organisational level.

I have noted above how Christian community work entails the creation of 'safe spaces' within which learning encounters can take place and relationships between people from diverse backgrounds can be built, leading to improved collective responses to their needs and concerns. I have also noted that these learning spaces often involve creative combinations of existing political, organisational, theological and individual interests. However, where differences between these interests are ignored or suppressed, the research demonstrated that destructive tensions can build up which prevent collective learning and ultimately can lead to the collapse of the organisational space. These findings lead us back into further theoretical debates over the nature of organisations that incorporate multiple stakeholders, and highlight the importance of considering the organisational dynamics.

In particular, these findings are reminiscent of Argyris and Schön's (1978) classic formulation of organisational systems which inhibit organisational learning through denying that conflicts may exist between competing organisational requirements. This denial is frequently maintained by different stakeholders within such systems "playing games" which seem to support their own individual interests but collectively contribute towards their inability to seek alternative strategies that may be more productive together. As a result, Argyris and Schön argue that, whilst

these organisations can cope with straightforward problems arising from application of existing corporate aims, these organisations are incapable of responding to those situations which call for reflecting on the relationship between different perspectives and values within the organisation, and/or which call for a more fundamental rethink of their current articulations of their aims. Ultimately, such organisations are seen as jeopardising their own survival through this inflexibility and corporate inability to continue thinking creatively in response to changing circumstances and understandings. Such theories cast the thesis findings on the tenuous nature of Christian community work organisations that fail to find ways of dealing with difference in a helpful explanatory light. Whilst further research on potential applications of learning organisation theory is necessary in this context to explore these possibilities further, the analysis presented in this thesis appears to support an alternative approach to practice that may hold more promise in developing these organisations sustainably, and fits with the broader informal education paradigm presented.

This alternative is for the Christian community worker to facilitate organisational reflection within both the hybrid organisation and its constituent partners. In doing so, the practitioner has to be conversant with the individual dynamics and logics of each constituent dimension, and able to facilitate bridges between them that allow difference to be further explored. In bringing these together within hybrid organisations,

as well as within their own practice, an essential aspect of the Christian community worker's role is then to facilitate the hybrid community work organisation's reflection on its collective purpose, identity, and understanding of 'the good', in order to enable them to manage the different interests involved in them. Such an approach is akin to Argyris and Schön's notion of 'double-loop learning' which enables reflection not only on modes of operationalisation but also on the values and principles informing them. On an even broader scale, such reflection might also have implications in terms of forming more sustainable broader coalitions for campaigning and taking collective action with other individuals and organisations on issues of shared social concern. This is because it may offer the potential of developing an underpinning analysis that is more robust in sustaining their co-operation despite the rough and tumble of political involvement. On both these levels, the acknowledgment of potential differences in agendas and identities may lead in the short term to a certain level of storminess and conflict as people work out ways of relating through the encounter. Organisations employing community workers and/or undertaking community work projects in such contexts would do well to recognise that continued support and learning are necessary to ride out the storm if this work is to reach its full potential by improving the depth of interaction and hence ultimately the effectiveness and sustainability of the work.

Similarly, policies which segment support (especially funding support) for projects based on whether they are clearly faith-based or not, and which preclude any element of faith-sharing within funded projects, risk exacerbating the tensions which lead to the breakdown of hybrid spaces which involve some mixture of these things, including some dialogue between different worldviews. Public funds may rightly be withheld from those organisations adopting aggressive evangelistic strategies which preclude any potential of the evangeliser learning in the process, or which impose conditions on vulnerable people if they are to receive support. However, this research does suggest scope for re-examining any remaining blanket prohibitions on considering equally funding different faith-related or faith-based groups whose work incorporates holistic expression of faith whilst creating potential for increased understanding between different groups through the type of interactions and hybrid spaces outlined here. Far from diminishing community cohesion, such spaces may offer some of the best potential for building better understanding between different worldviews and faiths through enabling learning-related interactions that acknowledge this dimension of life.

Implications (6): Developing the "Good Practitioner"

All these implications build on the emergent understanding of purpose highlighted above which sees Christian community workers as inherently involved in working through these debates in everyday practice. The

very nature of their work involves continually reflecting individually and collectively with the different groups around them, in ways that connect to broader bodies of theoretical understanding and traditions. In the process, they contribute to the active re-shaping of these traditions and understandings as they are manifested in the present, engaging often in struggles with powerful lobbies that seek to redefine the work to their own ends. As this research has demonstrated, on an organisational and socio-political level, without retaining a focus on the informal educative dimension of this practice, any redefinition of Christian community work practice in other terms frequently undermines many of the aims it sets out to achieve because of the continuing existence of unresolved differences without a framework for handling them.

However, if practitioners are to effectively deal with difference in ways that facilitate learning through developing relationships, without being sucked into powerful alternative agendas or any one of the multiple dimensions which make up the hybrid spaces of Christian community work, then this research has also highlighted that they need more than just a clearer sense of purpose and process.

In addition, this research has highlighted how practitioners also need a developed worldview that can handle differences, together with a clear sense of how their own values and identities may impact on their work. This is far from seeing the Christian community worker being merely an interchangeable and disposable faceless neutral bureaucrat, following a

pre-defined set of actions and rules. Instead, as Palmer (2000:11) notes, "good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher", and the quality of relationships that they can build with and between others.

Indeed, the research highlighted how many of the practitioners embodied this approach to their work, and found that their own identities, relationships and worldviews had profound implications for their practice. For these community work practitioners to be able to create the activities and spaces that enabled encounters between different individuals and groups, they needed to be able to reflect on how their own identity and understanding might impact on this process. Furthermore, without understanding how to build bridges between themselves and others that could cope with differences of identity and worldview, how can practitioners support others to engage in the same process?

This requires more than just developing a set of skills or following a predefined set of criteria that determine in advance what "good practice" might entail. Such approaches tend to reduce "good practice" to a recipe that can be delivered by anyone who follows the prescribed directions. However, the nature of such approaches is that they tend to limit the potential for learning by setting the limits of this learning through the framework adopted at the outset. In contrast, within a Christian faith-based approach that sets learning about God and each

other through building relationships at the centre of practice, the practitioner's own role is crucial in modelling how this can be done with those with whom they work. The ability of practitioners to manage their own multiple aspects of identity and find ways of evaluating and integrating different beliefs within their own worldview within these processes thus becomes crucial. In addition, as Banks (2004) notes, practitioners need to be able to reflect on multiple practice possibilities and complex combinations of values, concepts and approaches in deciding what to do in any one given situation, and especially in those situations involving dilemmas of some kind.

If this is so important, how can practitioners be supported in developing this integrity of identity, worldview, values and approach in order to enable them to achieve this aim? Previous literature (e.g. Schön, 1987) has already emphasised the need to develop reflective practitioners who are informed by wider theoretical debates and able to critically reflect on these in the process of their everyday action. The analysis of findings from this research extends these principles further in a number of regards relating specifically to professional development processes which incorporate learning about the place of faith within practice.

Firstly, it is crucial that issues of differences in identity, culture, worldview and religion are addressed in the professional development of all practitioners. All practitioners (whether faith-based or not) will work with people who have diverse cultures and worldviews (whether religious

or not), and will have their own identities, worldviews and cultures themselves. Developing practitioners' awareness of how such identities, worldviews and cultures might affect people's lives, including their expectations and interactions with workers, is thus relevant to all workers. So too is developing practitioners' reflexive ability to recognise the potential impact of their own identity, worldview/faith, values and culture in their own practice, and how these might interact.

However, it is important that the inclusion of such issues within professional development programmes goes beyond an approach based solely on cultural and/or religious literacy. Such approaches used in isolation can create an environment in which developing practitioners feel that they need to 'know all the facts' about every other culture and religion. The problem with such approaches is that these perceived expectations can actually inhibit practitioners' potential for opening encounters in a way that enables them to learn relationally in the field. When combined with an excessive emphasis on politically correct discourse, seen as necessary to avoid inadvertent offense, the potential for building relationships and learning can be severely limited. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise concerns that the language of 'sharing' can sometimes be used as a cover for imperialistic and/or oppressive interactions imposed by the powerful, and hence requires continual ethical scrutiny. However, it is equally important to recognise that forms of standardised 'neutrality' and politically-determined

'appropriate' language by themselves were found to fail to prevent such power differentials, and indeed could work to obscure (and hence perpetuate) them.

Instead, much more potential was found to be inherent in approaches which focused on developing practitioners who could make the connections between theoretical understandings (including those around cultures, beliefs, theologies, relationships and power) and practice. This potential lay particularly within developing the ability of these practitioners who weren't afraid to ask questions in order to clarify, critically analyse, debate, and, over time, whilst always showing respect for the other person, educate, challenge and learn (and be educated, challenged and learn in return). This involves developing them not only professionally but also personally and vocationally, and in the process enhancing their ability to reflect on the ways that interactions between identities (including their own, their organisation's, and others') can influence their practice.

To achieve this, learning spaces and processes created for the purposes of practice development need to embody similar principles to those already discussed for Christian community work practice itself. In particular, the data from the directly learning-focused elements of the research indicated that such spaces require several characteristics. These include being a space where there is enough challenge to stimulate learning, but without provoking identity-threatening recoil.

This requires the development of a supportive group environment, where good relationships between participants are maintained despite different points of view.[57] Furthermore, these spaces needed to be constructed in such a way as to value and rewards those willing to critically reflect even on those aspects of themselves which are most fundamental to their identity, and provides appropriate personal support to those engaging in this difficult reflection.

The processes generated within such spaces were equally found to be important in enabling effective learning. In particular, it was found to be important to recognise and incorporate space for reflection on differences within practice development programmes, rather than suppressing differences in the interests of a shallow compromise. Equally, the nature of differences should not be determined by pre-existing stereotypes, but make room for everyone to engage in debates over "good practice". Differences also needed to be recognised between those nominally ascribing to the same religious affiliation as well as between different worldviews; as one student respondent said:

> "So maybe, yeah, just to see beyond the Christian label and see that there is a lot of difference."

---

[57] This closely supports Palmer's concept of learning spaces needing to be 'hospitable, yet charged', as discussed earlier.

This creates particular dilemmas for practice development programmes which include practitioners coming from particularly wide ranges of faith and/or worldview, not least in terms of whether to create separate spaces for faith-specific reflection and/or integrate such reflection within the mainstream of the programme. In addition, if separate faith-specific space was created, should this be for any and all faiths together, as distinct from secular practitioners, or should space be created that was specific to a particular religious tradition. The Christian practitioner respondents seemed to benefit from both reflection within their own faith tradition and reflection stimulated by encounters with alternative secular and/or faith paradigms for practice. In practice, a combination of these alternatives seemed to offer the greatest potential for learning, providing this was managed in such a way as to not create apparent special treatment or disadvantage for any group. It seemed particularly important that the Christian students had spaces where they could engage in facilitated discussion of diverse theological traditions with other Christian students. For this to be successful, there was also a need for lecturers to engage directly with the specific theological landscape which is informing students' initial thinking. This included covering issues of contextualisation, highlighting how different people in different cultures and settings have applied their differing understandings of the centrally-important tenets of a faith in their particular context. By

doing this, students began to develop their ability to critically explore their own understandings and applications of their faith in their context.

However, if faith was only tackled in such separate ways, this contributed towards an appearance of singling out faith that created divisions and reinforced the myth of secular neutrality. Hence, these programmes also appeared to require a process which ensured that spaces were created for all students to connect issues of faith/worldview with broader discussions about how identity and values relate to practice. In turn, this required explicit recognition that all practice is value-based and contingent on the worldview of the practitioner, particularly regarding the central issue concerning debating what makes for the good. In addition, it also required explicit acknowledgement that the aims and methods of practice are frequently contested. Rather than resorting to individualistic relativism as a result, however, educational processes should also highlight and enable students to critically explore connections between different discourses, including political discourses, facilitating dialogue and enabling (in a Palmer-derived way) the shared pursuit of truth across the different cultures and perspectives involved. This should include exploring concepts which might give students a language to begin to communicate cross-culturally in both diverse church/Christian and state/secular contexts, as well as sharing across these different cultures the insights that might arise from inhabiting one particular culture. The inclusion of faith-related

examples in mainstream and not just specialised components of courses is another way that this integration could be aided.

Finally, Christian respondents indicated that a particularly important aspect of practice development for practitioners was making use of placements and other practice experiences as catalytic opportunities for exploring how different theoretical understandings might be integrated into particular practice decisions or situations. Having support from supervisors who understood both the diverse professional and theological discourses involved was a significant factor in enabling them to undertake constructively-critical reflection on the relationships between these diverse discourses and apply these into practice decisions in particular contexts. Developing reflection both in and on practice (drawing on Schön's 1987 distinction) thus enables individual practitioners to develop their own understandings of practice, and articulate these understandings in ways that enable their practice to be held open to wider scrutiny by their organisational and wider professional/practice communities. It is within such communities that grounded reflection can take place which links the wide range of practice debates about "the good" and how it can best be achieved in a particular situation with broader theoretical debates about the truth value of different perspectives carried on by the equally wide range of related academic disciplines, including theology. Christian community work practice holds within it the potential for making connections that

develop people's understanding of broader concepts such as 'community', 'truth' and 'the good' through building relationships that help people learn from each other, as well as within a Christian frame of reference developing their own understanding and relationship with God. Doing this thus helps Christian community work practitioners take reflective action together with others to improve the world around them, based on their developing relationships and understandings that motivate and guide them. As this thesis has shown, such a view of Christian community work as a process of informal education may provide a potential platform for further research and theoretical development. In turn, such research and theoretical development may hold the potential for developing a firmer and more consistent basis for informing practice that can handle the dilemmas of difference discussed herein.

9.4 Final Conclusion

The full development of a theory for Christian community work that might address the difficulties and debates over difference raised by this thesis is beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, this research has demonstrated the importance of acknowledging difference within Christian community work practice for all concerned. This research has also raised the possibility that further research and reflection that takes into account such differences might provide a key to a more developed

theory of Christian community work that could help inform the work of practitioners and related organisations. Such research would necessarily need to incorporate a greater focus on the diverse theological rationales cited by practitioners, given the indications of their potential for diverse yet profound impacts on practice.

In an environment where many are looking towards faith-based community work as a potential panacea for social ills, and current policies and practices are confused and restricted by the limited visions of the various stakeholders concerned, a larger vision is needed which addresses the concerns and daily experiences of practitioners engaging in this contested activity. Engaging with these particular perspectives, experiences and understandings, and facilitating dialogue between those holding diverse views, as well as with broader theoretical and theological perspectives, could provide the base needed to develop a more substantive view of what "good practice" and being a "good practitioner" might mean in this context. This may well involve creative hybrid forms of organisation and practice, linking people from diverse perspectives together, through which these difficult debates find local articulation and potentially resolution. For practitioners, who have to manage such debates as part of their everyday practice, as well as the diverse communities and agencies with whom they work, there can be few arenas where the challenge to develop critically-reflective and

integrated informal education theory and practice is more acute, nor

more needed.