

**Practising Oversight, Friendship and Reconciliation in Church Staff
Teams: A Case Study of How the Staff Teams of Two Large
Anglican Churches Dealt with Disagreement in Team Meetings**

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ABSTRACT

Every Christian church has to deal with conflict at different levels of intensity. However, little research has been conducted into conflict within churches, especially in Britain. Using the pastoral cycle as a framework, this research project considers how disagreement and low-level conflict is handled in the church, examines what use is made of facilitation and conflict resolution tools, and explores some theological reference points for reflecting on conflict in church life.

The field research involved a qualitative case study looking at the staff team meetings of two large churches in the Church of England, observing their meetings over a six month period, and then interviewing three members of each team.

The research demonstrated that the incumbents and staff team members in the two case studies were missing some basic facilitation skills and conflict resolution tools that could enable them to deal more effectively with disagreement in their team meetings. It showed that there was scope for them to develop a range of collaborative skills, including: distinguishing between content and process, and clarifying the process being used; use of paraphrasing and summarising; exploring and addressing underlying concerns behind initial positions; and testing for agreement or consensus. It also showed that the incumbent's attitude to disagreement affected the group's likelihood of resolving their disagreements.

Three theological strands are developed: that leadership of a staff team meeting is seen as an exercise in the *episcopal* or oversight aspect of a vicar's ministry – and also that of team members; that the functioning of the staff team offers an opportunity to work out part of what it means to be the body of Christ; and that working through their conflicts provides the staff team with the opportunity to develop the practice of peacemaking and reconciliation as a central aspect of Christian discipleship.

DECLARATION

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

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STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s). Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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I. Introduction

1. The Nature of the Research

This research project is an empirical, qualitative study of the staff teams of two large Anglican churches that explored how two incumbents (i.e. vicars) and their staff teams dealt with disagreement within their staff team meetings, primarily using an ethnographic method, and concluding with a theological reflection. So the focus is on an element in the practice of Christian ministry. As an exercise in practical theology, the project followed the pastoral cycle. The investigation involved field work with two churches in the Anglican Diocese of London, observing their staff team meetings on 13 and 14 occasions respectively over a six-month period, and then interviewing three members of each staff team. The main purpose of the interviews was to explore how team members thought theologically about how disagreement should be handled in their staff team, prior to further theological reflection by the researcher.

This introduction explains some background context to the project, sets out the research questions that the project sought to explore, and provides the range of reasons why the project was chosen.

2. Setting the Scene

I have worked with churches and church leaders since establishing Bridge Builders as a service for churches in 1996. My primary focus has been on training and equipping church ministers – mainly clergy – to handle disagreement and conflict more effectively, through enabling such leaders to understand themselves better, to think in a different way about conflict and through teaching processes for working with groups and interactions between people. In addition I have provided mediation, consultancy and intervention services for churches.¹ Between 1996 and 2011, Bridge Builders was based at the London Mennonite Centre, an English charitable trust, which was a resource centre for British churches offering a distinctive

¹ See Bridge Builders (n.d.) www.bbministries.org.uk for further information [accessed 20/3/12]

Mennonite-Anabaptist perspective on Christian discipleship.² In 2011, following the closure of the London Mennonite Centre, Bridge Builders was established as an independent charitable trust. Its central aim is to transform the culture of the church, especially in how leaders lead and how conflict is handled. So there is a primary concern for the way ministry is exercised by ministers and the processes they use, especially in engaging with disagreement, tensions and conflict.

While I had engaged with a good deal of escalated conflict in churches needing Bridge Builders' intervention services, in the research project of this professional doctorate I was more interested to examine how every-day, low-level disagreement was handled in the church, and to observe what use was made of some standard process and facilitation skills that Bridge Builders teaches. This interest grew out of a conviction that if every-day, low-level disagreement is handled well, then this will help to prevent tensions escalating to more intense and less manageable levels of conflict. I also wanted to explore how leaders think theologically about engaging with disagreement and conflict, and to extend my own theological reflection in this area given that it has been the focus of my ministry with Bridge Builders since 1996.

Having been involved as a member of a number of churches of different sizes, it struck me that one realistic way to explore this topic was through a project working with the staff teams of large churches, given their frequency of meeting, and given that all the team members are exercising leadership roles of various kinds within the local church. This led me to design the research project reported on in this dissertation.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, and review in a revised way in Appendix 1 here, conflict in churches is an under-researched area.³ There is clearly a need for more research relating to conflict in churches in England. In part this is because conflict in the church is a naturally occurring and inevitable phenomenon, and all churches have to deal with conflict, as the survey in Appendix 1 illuminates.

At the outset, it is worth noting that one of the difficulties in talking about conflict in the church is with our understanding of the word 'conflict' itself.

² The London Mennonite Centre's building in Highgate, where it had been located for 58 years, was closed in August 2011.

³ Alastair J. M. McKay, 'How does the church handle conflict in its midst, and what challenges does it face in handling conflict constructively? – An Academic Journal style article', essay submitted towards a DMin degree, Spurgeon's College, London, February 2009, and available in revised form at www.bbministries.org.uk/articles/how-is-conflict-handled-in-church-life [accessed 20/12/11]

In contemporary conflict studies, ‘conflict’ is generally defined in broader and more generic terms than the common use of the term in the news media, for example, where the word is typically used as a shorthand way to designate violent conflict and warfare. One academic definition commonly cited in relation to interpersonal conflict is that offered by Wilmot and Hocker:

Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals.⁴

This definition points to certain key elements in an understanding of conflict: that a ‘struggle’ of some kind is involved; that it becomes conflict once that struggle is expressed in some way, moving beyond something latent; that it generally involves people who are in some kind of existing relationship and interdependency, which is certainly the case when reflecting on the congregational and staff team context in the church; and that people’s perceptions – and by implication their misperceptions – are central to their experience of conflict.

A more user-friendly definition is the simple definition developed by Carolyn Schrock-Shenk who suggests that: ‘Conflict equals differences plus tension.’⁵ Most people recognise that there will inevitably be differences within any group of people. Some of these will be differences which no one is worried about, but there will be other differences which lead to some level of tension in the group. When we are dealing with such tension, then we are dealing with conflict.

This broader use of the term means that much more is included in what is designated as ‘conflict’ than might otherwise be the case, including low-level, everyday disagreement. Such a definition also helps open up the possibility of embracing and positively engaging with the experience of conflict. However, it is important to recognise that many people use the term conflict to refer to something which is seen as destructive and negative.⁶ Therefore we note that for most people it represents a change to see conflict as something potentially constructive which offers an opportunity for growth and positive change.

⁴ William W. Wilmot and Joyce L. Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2001⁶), p.41

⁵ Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, ‘Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation’ in Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler (eds) *Making Peace with Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), p.23

⁶ Dean Tjosvold, ‘Defining Conflict and Making Choices about its Management: Lighting the Dark Side of Organizational Life’, *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 2006, **17**(2), pp.87-95

As the survey in Appendix 1 indicates, most research that has been conducted into church conflict has been done in the USA. The North American church context is substantially different from that in England and in Europe generally. The English situation can be defined as a post-Christendom context in which the Christian church is relatively small in size and appears to be increasingly marginal, albeit offering a potentially dynamic and prophetic alternative to the surrounding secularised society.⁷

In terms of congregational studies, a case study approach seemed worth considering, and has been well proven since James Hopewell's pioneering study.⁸ Mathew Guest's study of St Michael-le-Belfrey stands in this tradition, in an English setting.⁹ Mary McClintock Fulkerson also models this in a North American context.¹⁰ However, while taking a case study approach would not be a novel research method, the relatively small scale of a Doctorate of Ministry (DMin) project meant that the scope would need to be much more limited than the extensive research projects undertaken by Hopewell, Guest and McClintock Fulkerson.

Andrew Todd has demonstrated that it is possible to engage in a detailed discourse analysis of discussions within church groups.¹¹ It is worth clarifying that this study never intended to engage in such a detailed analysis of the particular words used by participants, although Todd demonstrates that it could have been possible to do so. Instead the intended focus here was always on the processes, tools and techniques used when staff team members gather together for a regular team meeting, especially at the moments when there is disagreement between them, and on what the outcome of those disagreements was.

The field research for this project focused on the intra-group functioning of ministry staff teams of broadly Evangelical Anglican parishes with corporate- and programme-sized congregations, in the Anglican Diocese of London, specifically in relation to: how the incumbent and other team members handled low-level

⁷ See Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), Stuart Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005), and John Drane, *After McDonaldization: Mission, Ministry and Christian Discipleship in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008)

⁸ James Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987)

⁹ Mathew Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture: A Congregational Study in Innovation* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007)

¹⁰ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

¹¹ Andrew J. Todd, 'The Talk, Dynamics and Theological Practice of Bible-Study Groups: A Qualitative Empirical Investigation', unpublished PhD thesis, Cardiff University, Wales, June 2009

disagreement and conflict in their team meetings; what use they made of some standard facilitation and conflict resolution tools; and how they thought theologically about conflict in the church. This focus was explored through engaging with two case studies, using participant observation and semi-structured interviews, essentially ethnographic or social science methods. Part of the intention of the research project therefore was that it would shed some light on the culture of how low-level conflict was handled in two particular church staff teams, and on how team members viewed their engagement with such low-level conflict theologically.

Before moving to explain the sizing of congregations, let me clarify some of my other terms. By ‘ministry staff team’ I mean the group of people employed by the congregation that meets together on a regular basis for the purposes of planning, visioning and review. The staff team may be comprised of a mixture of stipendiary, salaried, non-stipendiary and voluntary staff. How the staff team is defined will vary from parish to parish. In practice, I was looking for churches with a staff team of at least six people, and no larger than about ten, that met together once a week for a team meeting. Such teams need to be distinguished from ‘ministry leadership teams’, which consist mainly of ‘groups of clergy serving a number of different congregations’.¹² By ‘Evangelical’ I mean churches that would identify themselves within the uncontested range of the Evangelical spectrum set out by Rob Warner.¹³ By ‘broadly’ I am recognising that individual churches might add other descriptors than simply ‘Evangelical’.¹⁴ The Diocese of London is a part of the Church of England and covers a geographic area within Greater London, north of the river Thames.¹⁵ (Note that in this study I am focused on the Church of England, and my references to ‘Anglican’ are to the Church of England, unless otherwise indicated.) By ‘incumbent’ I mean the parish priest who has the pastoral responsibility for the parish or benefice. As I have indicated above, by ‘conflict’ I am meaning differences within the team over which there is disagreement and tension, and thus using the term broadly and generically, as is common in the field of conflict studies.¹⁶ This is the definition of conflict that I am working with

¹² Andrew Dawswell, *Ministry Leadership Teams: Theory and Practice in Effective Collaborative Ministry* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2003), p.3

¹³ Rob Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism, 1966-2001: A Theological and Sociological Study* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), pp.229-230

¹⁴ For example, ‘Conservative’, ‘Open’ or ‘Charismatic’

¹⁵ See The Diocese of London (n.d.) www.london.anglican.org [accessed 12/8/13]

¹⁶ Schrock-Shenk, ‘Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation’, p.23

throughout this dissertation, and the term therefore incorporates ‘disagreement’ – contrary to some understandings of the term.¹⁷

In terms of narrow purpose, my intention was that my research project would inform my theological reflection both on conflict in the life of the church, and on Bridge Builders’ work and ministry. My hope was that the research would prove useful to the two case study teams that I worked with, shedding light on their team functioning, and potentially enabling better future functioning. In addition, I hoped that the research would provide insights that might be useful to other ministry staff teams in the Church of England – and potentially to the staff teams of churches from other denominations also. Furthermore, I hoped that the research might assist the development of the training and intervention services provided by Bridge Builders. Mindful that Bridge Builders has in the past mostly trained individual leaders, either who chose to attend courses that Bridge Builders sponsored or through courses that Bridge Builders was contracted to lead, I anticipated that this research project might suggest an additional focus on training whole teams, as well as on equipping team leaders to work with the team that they lead.

In terms of wider purpose, the aim of this research project is shared with Swinton and Mowat’s view of the aim of practical theology generally, which is ‘to enable the Church to perform faithfully as it participates in God’s ongoing mission in, to and for the world’.¹⁸ This wider purpose is one that resonates with Bridge Builders’ central purpose. I therefore had a missional purpose, and did not choose my research focus simply because it was interesting for its own sake. (It may be worth noting that the latter appears to be a rationale that has characterised the recent re-emergence of interest in congregational studies in the UK.¹⁹)

On the sizing of congregations, it is worth recognising that the dynamics of churches vary according to their size, and that the last thirty years has seen a trend for larger churches. In 1984, when I first began my Christian journey in earnest, I became a member of St Michael-le-Belfrey, a large Anglican church in York. Although not unique, St Mike’s, as it was known, pioneered a path which ‘inspired

¹⁷ For example, Kenneth O. Gangel, *Team Leadership in Christian Ministry: Using Multiple Gifts to Build a Unified Vision* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1997²), p.186

¹⁸ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), p.25

¹⁹ Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting and Linda Woodhead (eds), *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p.xiii

many other centres of evangelical revival'.²⁰ At the time, in the mid-1980s, with a total congregation of between 350 and 750 people, St Michael-le-Belfrey was probably one of a relatively small number of 'corporate-sized' Anglican congregations in England.²¹ A 'corporate-sized' congregation is one with over 350 members, and a 'programme-sized' congregation is one with between 150 and 350 members. My sizing designations are set out more fully in Appendix 2: Categorising and Calculating Church Sizes. In the mid-1980s it is possible that there were, as yet, no 'mega-sized' Anglican churches in England, that is with more than 1,000 members.²² This is because: 'The large congregation is a relatively recent development.'²³ (At least, we might qualify, a recent development in terms of the twentieth century Western church.)²⁴ In the USA, this growth in the number of large congregations took off significantly from the 1970s onwards.²⁵ The publication in the 1980s of three biographical texts charting the rise of three different large Anglican churches in England, along with a book detailing several growing English churches including other Anglican ones, suggests that this growth happened slightly later in England.²⁶

The overall picture for the Church of England in recent years is one of decline.²⁷ However, despite this, today the number of corporate-sized congregations has increased significantly, and there are also several mega-sized Anglican churches. Within the Anglican Diocese of London alone, in April 2009 the archdeacons of the diocese were able to identify twelve corporate-sized churches within the Evangelical spectrum of the Church of England, and many more programme-sized churches – in addition to three mega-sized churches which were ruled out of this research project.

²⁰ Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture*, p.57

²¹ For the St Michael-le-Belfrey numbers, see Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture*, p.63

²² St Michael-le-Belfrey was not unique at this point: there were other well-known Anglican examples in London, Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol, Durham and Sheffield. Some of these, such as Holy Trinity Brompton, may have reached mega-church size as early as the 1980s.

²³ Gilbert R. Rendle and Susan Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron: Staffing and Supervision in Large Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007), p.1

²⁴ There were, no doubt, some mega-sized churches in the nineteenth century, such as the London Metropolitan Tabernacle, where Charles Spurgeon preached to thousands.

²⁵ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.1

²⁶ David C. K. Watson, *You Are My God: An Autobiography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983); George Carey, *Church in the Market Place* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1984, 1989²); Robert Warren, *In the Crucible: The Testing and Growth of a Local Church* (Crowborough: Highland Books, 1989); Eddie Gibbs, *Ten Growing Churches* (London: Marc Europe, 1984)

²⁷ See Peter Brierley, *Pulling Out of the Nosedive: A Contemporary Picture of Churchgoing - What the 2005 English Church Census Reveals* (London: Christian Research, 2006) and Christian Research, *Religious Trends No 5 – 2005-2006* (London: Christian Research, 2006)

(Further, I subsequently found that one of the churches identified by the relevant archdeacon as corporate-sized churches was in fact mega-sized.) Most major cities in England are now likely to have at least one corporate-sized church. As Malcolm Grundy has pointed out, these churches tend to be ‘famous’ and ‘eclectic’, and people attend them ‘for a whole range of different reasons from those which attract others to small, local congregations’.²⁸ Such churches therefore warrant being the focus of research, as Mathew Guest has manifestly demonstrated.²⁹ While there are large churches outside the Evangelical stream, most of the corporate- and mega-sized Anglican churches that I am aware of fall within the Evangelical spectrum.³⁰ It would seem reasonable to suppose that this may be because they are the fruit of the ‘activism’ which David Bebbington has identified as one of the four key features of historical and contemporary Evangelicalism.³¹

3. Research Questions and Assumptions

This project was focussed on exploring an element of the practice of Christian ministry and, by engaging with two examples from among the corporate- and programme-sized Anglican churches in the Diocese of London, it sought to consider the following research questions:³²

1. How do the incumbents and ministry staff teams of large churches deal with their disagreements, differences and tensions – i.e. with (low-level) conflict, as so defined – within their team meetings?
2. What use do these incumbents and ministry staff teams make of some standard processes, tools and techniques for facilitating meetings and resolving conflicts within their team meetings?

²⁸ Malcolm Grundy, *Understanding Congregations* (London: Mowbray, 1998), p.36

²⁹ Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture*

³⁰ Rob Warner offers one conceptualisation of the Evangelical spectrum, conceived as having three orientations, expressed by six different types. See Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism*, pp.229-230

³¹ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.3-17. The other three qualities Bebbington identifies are ‘conversionism’, ‘biblicism’ and ‘crucicentrism’.

³² The framing of these questions has been adapted from the one set out in my original research proposal, in order to better reflect the research and observation that was undertaken.

3. To what extent, if any, do these incumbents and staff team members view their engagement with disagreement, differences and conflict as a task of Christian discipleship with theological implications?
4. What wider theological reflections offer a framework within which to place and interpret the findings of the field research and to view conflict in the life of the church?

Originally, I had also hoped to explore an additional research question, namely:

How far can the way that the two case study staff teams deal with their disagreements and differences be explained by the ‘style profiles’ of the incumbent (i.e. vicar) and the other team members?³³ In the event, it did not prove possible to examine this question within the scope of this dissertation, and a further essay is needed to set out the data gathered on that question.

Implied within the above research questions are certain assumptions on my part, that I was looking to test in some way through the journey of the research project. First, that differences, disagreements and tensions within a leadership group are likely to surface and be expressed when working out how to function together as a staff team serving the body of the church. Second, that if every-day, low-level disagreement is handled well by an incumbent and the rest of the staff team, then this will help to prevent tensions escalating to more intense and less manageable levels of conflict; thus the handling of low-level conflict is worthy of active consideration.

Third, that incumbents of large churches, and members of their staff teams, are likely to make regular use of some standard tools and techniques for facilitating meetings and resolving conflicts within their team meetings, and that if they do so those meetings are likely to be more effective. Fourth, that dealing with our differences, and the tension over those differences, is a core task of Christian discipleship, and can provide an experience of, and be an expression of, the reconciliatory work of God in Christ.

In addition, I held a further assumption in relation to the additional research question on communication styles, namely that the communication style of the incumbent and the other team members will always contribute to the way that the team handles tensions over its differences; but, on their own, these style elements

³³ As assessed using the following instrument: Susan K. Gilmore and Patrick W. Fraleigh, *The Friendly Style Profile for Communication at Work* (Eugene, OR: Friendly Press, 2004⁴)

will only give a partial explanation of how the group functions and deals with its differences.

4. Reasons for the Choice of Focus

Colin Robson stresses the importance of the ‘need to have a strong interest in the topic [of your research] to keep you going through the bad times’.³⁴ My reasons for being interested in the above research focus were a varied mixture of research-based, professional and personal reasons.

In terms of research-based reasons, my expectation was that the staff team in Anglican churches functions as more of a peer group of colleagues than the Parochial Church Council (PCC), which could have been an alternative focus of research, had I wanted to choose the formal decision-making subgroup of the congregation. Because of its smaller size, the staff team is easier to research than the PCC, and will also tend to meet on a much more frequent basis than the PCC. The PCC is the primary decision-making body in the local church, within the structures of the Church of England, and comprises the clergy and lay officers of the parish, and deanery representatives. Typically PCC meetings are not held more often than once a month, whereas staff team meetings in larger churches are typically held weekly. Pragmatically, therefore, these aspects of the staff team meeting made it a better focus for research given the limitations of time and resources available to a part-time student within the scope of a DMin project. The parameters set out above also helped to reduce some of the variables that complicate any qualitative research project, and the approach taken here seems to be one potentially legitimate way of doing this.

Although not tested through the field research, my conviction is that the functioning of the staff team both reflects something of the wider functioning of the local church, in microcosm, and has a profound impact on shaping that functioning. Rendle and Beaumont concur:

Health comes from the centre of an organisation – by the healthy practices of the staff and volunteers who sit in the central positions of leaders. Staff and volunteer leaders actually model and mentor the rest of the congregation in appropriate ways of relating to one another, talking with one another, making

³⁴ See Colin Robson, *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002²), p.49

decisions with each other, and a host of other critical but hidden norms that guide the life of the congregation.³⁵

A similar point is made by Edwin Friedman, using a family systems theory frame, about the impact of those in the primary leadership position ('the head') on the rest of the organisation ('the body').³⁶ If one accepts the validity of such theory, this helps to justify a focus on the staff team as one form of enquiry into church congregations in Britain. Further, in the field of congregational studies, whether in Britain or North America, to my knowledge no one has tried to conduct similar research to this project. In which case the research project reported here is breaking new ground, and hopefully adding to knowledge, a key requirement for doctoral-level research.³⁷

There were also some professional reasons for the chosen focus. Bridge Builders does more work with the Church of England than any other single denomination, principally because of the Church of England's size relative to the other churches in England. Typically more than half the church leaders who attend our courses are Anglican clergy, and the majority of our mediation and intervention work involves Anglican cases.³⁸ One of our challenging mediation cases in recent years involved a staff team in the Diocese of London, which raised a number of questions including about how the vicar and team as a whole dealt with disagreement. Hence it made sense to focus on Anglican churches for the field research and, given my own and Bridge Builders' geographic location in North London, therefore to focus on the Anglican Diocese of London, which effectively covers the northern half of Greater London.

My own work experience of staff teams has enabled me to relate to the dynamics of staff teams of corporate-sized churches. For over thirteen years I was part of the staff team of the London Mennonite Centre, a group that fluctuated between about six and twelve people during that period, consisting of a mix of missionary, volunteer and salaried staff members. The centre's staff team typically met together for a staff team meeting every other week throughout my time.

³⁵ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.195

³⁶ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2007), pp.16-17

³⁷ Spurgeon's College, 'Doctorate of Ministry - Guidelines for Module 491: Study and Research Methodology', p.10

³⁸ Including the Church in Wales and the Scottish Episcopal Church, in addition to the Church of England.

Although the Mennonite Centre was a church service organisation, and not a church itself, my experience there provided a somewhat comparable experience to the dynamics of a church staff team. As a member of this staff team I also experienced the leadership of three different directors of the centre in the primary leadership role, as well as a two-year period without any formal director. This gave me some insight into the impact of the primary leader's style and functioning on a staff team.

In addition, I also had some personal reasons for choosing my focus. In September 2008, I returned to being a member of a corporate-sized Anglican church, with a large staff team: St James's, Muswell Hill. This church has some similarities to St Michael-le-Belfrey in York, where I was first involved as a church member and new Christian between July 1984 and August 1987, and to St Mark's, Kennington, where I was a member from October 1988 to November 1990, prior to my marriage. Both St Mike's and St Mark's were then corporate-sized Anglican churches. With my move to St James's, I therefore developed a renewed personal interest in the functioning of large Anglican churches. And although I greatly appreciate different expressions of the church, my roots are in, and some of my basic sympathies are towards, the broadly Evangelical range of the Church of England's spectrum.

More significantly possibly, from early 2009 – from around the time I formulated the research proposal for this project – I began reconsidering the possibility of a call to ordination as a priest in the Church of England, which I had first explored in 1985, when in my early twenties. After an extended process of discernment, in the autumn of 2012 I began part-time training for ordination. My field research, reading and writing-up have therefore all had a particular interest for me, as a key element of the project has proved to be an exploration of the exercise of leadership and the practice of ministry in the Church of England, in a team context.

II. Literature Review

1. Introduction

Prior to conducting the field research into an aspect of Christian ministry, I sought to gain a clearer understanding of certain questions by reviewing some relevant literature. A first question was about why it is worth bothering with the church and its ministers or leaders, and what the significance of the church might be in fulfilling God's mission. This question seemed important to acknowledge if one is going to justify giving attention to the practice of Christian ministry within the church.

A second question was about how Christian ministry is understood and conceptualised in today's church and world, particularly in an Anglican context. I was concerned to explore this question as I had spent so many years outside the Church of England, within the Mennonite Church, from 1991 to 2003. In conducting research in an Anglican setting, I therefore wanted to hold a better understanding of ministry in that context, and of how it might intersect with a focus on the process of staff team meetings and engagement with disagreement and conflict in the church.

A third question was about what resources and guidance might be available for the staff ministry teams of large churches particularly in relation to holding their staff team meetings. This seemed worth reviewing since this would be the primary focus of the field research.

Finally, a fourth question was about which standard tools and techniques for facilitating meetings and resolving conflicts within their meetings to focus on in exploring the second research question, and identifying suitable published references for these. This seemed important given that these tools and techniques would be some of the central items I would be focussing on during the participant observation process, which would form the largest element of the field work.

The literature review that follows thus falls into four sections addressing the above four questions. As preparatory work to this research project, I also carried out a major survey of the available literature on church conflict.³⁹ This served to highlight the need for the type of research undertaken here and the absence of any

³⁹ McKay, 'How does the church handle conflict in its midst'

similar research. That literature review has been included in a revised form in Appendix 1, for while not integral to the body of the dissertation it is important background and justification for the research, and covers a review not readily available elsewhere.

2. The Significance of the Church and Its Leaders

I share with a Mennonite minister, Phil Kniss, the conviction that ‘God created human beings for the purpose of community, and God called people into a covenant community for the purpose of participating in God’s mission’.⁴⁰ Kniss points here to the communal nature of authentic human experience, and to the place of the church in fulfilling the *missio Dei*, something affirmed by other writers.⁴¹ In this context I note, with the Anglican minister and consultant, Robert Warren, that the apostle Paul places a great deal of emphasis on relationships within the church and relatively little on preaching the gospel.⁴² ‘The reason is simply that Paul saw that the primary way in which the gospel is preached is through the way that God’s people share a common life shaped by the truth revealed in Christ.’⁴³ It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the church is now God’s ‘primary agent of mission’ and ‘not simply ... somewhere to which to take the person seeking after faith, but ... the supreme means by which God has established that the gospel should be demonstrated in human life and human community’.⁴⁴ In consequence, ‘the church needs to pay close attention to how it is the church’, because ‘the work of spreading the faith is intimately bound up with how the church functions’.⁴⁵

So one of the starting points for this dissertation is that the church is significant for fulfilling God’s mission, and that how the church lives out its internal

⁴⁰ Philip K. Kniss, ‘Developing Christian Communal and Missional Practices Through Small Formational Communities at Park View Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Virginia’, unpublished DMin thesis, Northern Seminary, Lombard, Illinois, March 2009

⁴¹ See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991); Craig van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000); Craig van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007)

⁴² Robin Greenwood and David Heywood also both pick up on this in their exploration of the quality of relationships – *koinonia* or communion – as central to what it means to be the church. See Robin Greenwood, *Parish Priests: For the Sake of the Kingdom* (London: SPCK, 2009), pp.1-27; David Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 2011), pp.118-125

⁴³ Robert Warren, *Being Human, Being Church: Spirituality and Mission in the Local Church* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995), pp.14-15

⁴⁴ Warren, *Being Human, Being Church*, p.14

⁴⁵ Warren, *Being Human, Being Church*, pp.3 & 12

life speaks directly to the contribution it makes towards that mission.⁴⁶ Like David Watson, therefore, I can affirm that ‘I believe in the church’.⁴⁷

Although the life of the staff team of a corporate- or programme-sized church is only one aspect of the internal life of a congregation (with its staff team meetings only one aspect of that life), the relationships within the staff group are likely to be highly influential on the rest of the congregation. In one of the early books looking at the ministry staff teams of large churches, Kenneth Mitchell uses a systems (and particularly family systems theory) lens for looking at such groups.⁴⁸ He asserts that ‘the relationships [the staff team] maintains within itself are models for the relationships in the congregation’.⁴⁹ He bases this on the understanding that ‘when a subsystem takes leadership in a larger system, the smaller system’s management of relationships is likely to be taken by members of the larger system as the norm for relationships’.⁵⁰ (Mitchell draws an analogy with the influence of parents in setting children’s norms for behaviour; by implication, this sees the ministry staff team as taking on a parental-type role within the congregation, at least in terms of their influence.) As we have already observed, this forms a central understanding for Rendle and Beaumont who have written one of very few recent books that directly address the needs of the staff of large churches.⁵¹ Arguably there is also a correspondence with the way that the early church was developed, through Jesus’ initiative of calling and forming a small team of twelve apostles, who then went on to shape the culture of the early church in profound ways.⁵²

It is not just a family systems lens that affirms the key role that leaders play in shaping the culture of the organisations they lead. This is well established in the business and organisational development field, notably by Edgar Schein.⁵³ Schein offers a theory of culture in organisations, and seeks to demonstrate the key role that leaders play in shaping and applying the principles of culture to achieve

⁴⁶ Covered further in: Alastair J. M. McKay, ‘How do you understand the relationship between the Church, the world and the kingdom of God, and how has this understanding influenced and shaped your ministry in your local community?’, an essay submitted towards a DMin degree, Spurgeon’s College, London, February 2006

⁴⁷ David C. K. Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979). Watson offers a detailed, profound yet idiosyncratic ecclesiology, based closely on his experience at St Michael-le-Belfrey in York.

⁴⁸ ‘Family systems theory’ or ‘Bowen Theory’ being derived from the work of Dr Murray Bowen.

⁴⁹ Kenneth R. Mitchell, *Multiple Staff Ministries* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1988), p.135

⁵⁰ Mitchell, *Multiple Staff Ministries*, p.135

⁵¹ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.195

⁵² David Heywood makes a similar observation. See Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry*, pp.189-190

⁵³ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2004³)

organisational goals. The point is also recognised by a conservative theologian who observes that ‘The ministers of a church staff can provide the congregation with a model of servant ministry through their relationships with each other and by their performances of their responsibilities’.⁵⁴

Bill Hybels, the founding pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, which is claimed to be one of the ‘most attended’ churches in North America, reached a similar conclusion about the importance of leadership, having visited hundreds of thriving churches around the world: ‘What flourishing churches have in common is that they are led by people who possess and deploy the spiritual gift of leadership.’⁵⁵ Hence, based on his conviction of the power of the church to bring healing to the world, this led him to his famous mantra: ‘The local church is the hope of the world and its future rests primarily in the hands of its leaders.’⁵⁶ (He does concede that ‘ultimately the beauty and power of the church flow from the mind of God and depend on the blessing of God’ but his focus on the importance of leadership comes from looking at things ‘on a more human level’.⁵⁷ Although he does not make this explicit, this at least points to a partnership between God and humans.) Hybels tries not to over-state the importance of leadership in the church, but he does see it playing a critical role:

It’s not that I believe that the gift of leadership is more important than other gifts. It’s simply that people with the gift of leadership are uniquely equipped to come up with strategies and structures that provide opportunities for other people to use their gifts most effectively. Leaders see the big picture and understand how to help others find their place of service within that picture.⁵⁸

What Hybels does less well is to recognise some of the limitations and fallen nature of the church. For that we need turn elsewhere. Nicholas Healy’s reflections on the need for a realistic view of the church’s limitations and sinfulness in developing an ecclesiology are helpful.⁵⁹ Likewise Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides a salutary insight into what makes for an ‘understanding of genuine Christian community’: this will require ‘A great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we

⁵⁴ William P. Tuck, ‘A Theology for Healthy Church Staff Relations’, *Review and Expositor* 78 (winter 1981), pp.5-14

⁵⁵ Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), p.26

⁵⁶ Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, p.27

⁵⁷ Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, p.24

⁵⁸ Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, p.26

⁵⁹ Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.10

are fortunate, with ourselves’ and ‘The sooner this moment of disillusionment comes over the individual and the community, the better for both’.⁶⁰

3. Ordained Ministry in the Church of England and the Development of *Episcopal and Collaborative Ministry*

Over ten years ago, after an early workshop run by Bridge Builders, an Anglican priest who had participated in the training provided some helpful oral feedback at the end of the workshop. He was broadly appreciative and affirmative of the workshop content. However, he provided one main criticism. He considered that there was not enough content about leadership and the role of leaders within a group. I took the criticism to heart, and since then have sought to address this in various ways through the training that Bridge Builders offers. This is also reflected in Bridge Builders’ current strapline: ‘Transforming church culture: the way leaders lead and the way conflict is handled.’ It should therefore not have been a surprise that one of the clear findings of the field research project reported on here concerned the significant impact of the vicar, the primary leader, on the way that the staff team meeting functioned (see Chapter IV below). Given this, it is important to have some clarity about how we understand the vicar’s role and ordained ministry more generally.

There is now a widespread recognition that:

The forces for change that have been affecting our culture and society have to affect the whole way we are church; the way we engage as churches in the mission of God in our generation; and therefore on the nature and task of those who are ordained ministers.⁶¹

A number of recent texts have sought to address the new nature and task of ministry that is called for in today’s world. I have found those by three Anglican ministers and theologians, Robin Greenwood, David Heywood and especially Steven Croft to be most helpful.⁶² Based on the emergence of leadership roles in the early church, Croft identifies three dimensions to today’s ordained ministry, in relation to his

⁶⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), p.35

⁶¹ Steven Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions: Ordination and Leadership in the Local Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008²), p.5

⁶² Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*; Greenwood, *Parish Priests*; Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry*

primary audience, of the Church of England and the Methodist Church. First there is the diaconal role of practical service. Second is the presbyteral or priestly role of preaching the word of the gospel and administering the sacraments and prayer. In the past, these two have formed the main elements of parish clergy role and training. However, the new demands of ministry today, mean that ‘A cluster of skills which ... we will call enabling or collaborative leadership skills has now become one of the primary skills of those who exercise their ordained ministry in the local church’.⁶³ Croft locates these skills or ‘gifts’ within the third dimension of ministry, the practice of *episcopate* or oversight.⁶⁴

As Croft sees it, this episcopal role of the ordained parish minister includes three main aspects: holding the ring and articulating and testing vision; enabling the ministry of others; and watching over oneself and others. He develops these ideas on *episcopate* further in a later document, adding a fourth aspect which involves ‘representation and connexion’, meaning relating the church to its environment and interpreting the environment to the church; and ‘location’, meaning positioning the church in relation to society and interpreting that positioning ‘both internally and externally’.⁶⁵ Croft observes that historically, the church has placed nearly all its focus on the diaconal and presbyteral aspects of ordained ministry, at least for those working in a local church or parish context. His distinctive contribution is to frame the episcopal function as part of every minister’s role, not just that of the bishop, and to identify it as a function needing much more focus in our current mission context.⁶⁶ He also takes the idea further, by identifying this episcopal task as one that is shared with a group of lay leaders, and which does not solely reside with the vicar.⁶⁷

⁶³ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.16

⁶⁴ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, pp.141-192.

⁶⁵ Steven Croft, ‘A Theology of Church Leadership’ in *Focus on Leadership* (York: Foundation for Church Leadership, 2005), p.31. Although Croft has become ‘more and more convinced’ that this fourth aspect is ‘a key element in all church leadership’, not just that of the bishop, it does not connect directly to the concerns in this dissertation, and is not explored further here.

⁶⁶ Although my focus is on the large church context, I note that Truscott and Mynors see placing a primary emphasis on the episcopal aspect of ministry as the key need for clergy in rural ministry today. See John Truscott and Jim Mynors, ‘A fresh approach to rural ministry’, published December 2009, available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes/A-fresh-approach-to-rural-ministry [accessed 18/5/11].

⁶⁷ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, pp.170-171. Croft does not seem to be addressing larger churches in his book: his Appendix 2, on the implications of different sizes for the ministerial role, does not cover corporate- or mega-sized churches. However, two references to staff teams show that he is aware of such churches, and of the role that the staff team might play in the episcopal dimension of ministry. See Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.155.

Greenwood takes Croft's thinking a step further: 'It would seem to be a faithful development of the meanings of *episkope* to include, not just the one ordered to ensure the Church keeps true its character, but the entire body as a corporate episcopal personality.'⁶⁸ This suggests seeing the whole church having episcopal functions to fulfil. Greenwood does not develop this idea of 'corporate *episkope*', at least not in concrete terms.⁶⁹ He focuses instead on the *episkope* of the parish priest, seen as the 'notable agent and mouthpiece' of that episcopal function.⁷⁰

Heywood picks up a similar idea to Greenwood's in relation to 'ministry' generally by asserting that 'Like mission, ministry is the task of the whole church. Each of its members is called to ministry by virtue of his or her baptism.'⁷¹ He does not articulate this further in relation to the specific episcopal aspect of the ministry role or task, although he does go on to advocate for a model of local ministry teams 'under the oversight' of teams of ordained and lay ministers, hence with an episcopal function operating at a local level.⁷² For, as Heywood sees it, a reimagining of ministry will mean that:

Stipendiary ministry itself will become much more 'episcopal': ... involved in resourcing, training and supporting the local community ministry teams. This in turn will involve a reappraisal of the role of the bishop. The provision of *episkope*, oversight or supervision ... will need be brought much closer to the situation on the ground.⁷³

This idea remains largely undeveloped in Heywood's book. However, it is one that Greenwood develops in relation to the role of the parish priest. In unpacking what *episkope* might look like at the local level, Greenwood uses a sailing metaphor, envisaging the priest as 'navigator'. This image of navigation is seen being expressed through three 'processes': exercising discernment, providing blessing and being a witness.⁷⁴ (Graham Cray also identifies discernment, 'focussed on the activity of the Holy Spirit', as at the heart of what is called for in leadership within

⁶⁸ Greenwood, *Parish Priests*, p.90

⁶⁹ Greenwood, *Parish Priests*, p.110. Greenwood makes a number of general comments, e.g. '*Episkope* in a *koinonia* church will mean that the whole community, its complementary callings, learns to mediate God's intensive holiness among as much of creation as possible' (Greenwood, *Parish Priests*, p.114). He does not develop what this might mean in practice.

⁷⁰ Greenwood, *Parish Priests*, p.110

⁷¹ Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry*, p.157

⁷² Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry*, p.157

⁷³ Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry*, p.203

⁷⁴ Greenwood, *Parish Priests*, pp.100-120

today's church.⁷⁵ Malcolm Torry makes a similar identification, although he names the task as 'listening' rather than discernment.⁷⁶) Greenwood offers a strong case for the development of 'parish priests who know they are called to a ministry of navigation so that the whole Church can grow in the capacity to mediate and represent Christ'.⁷⁷ He also helpfully draws attention to the critique of women writers regarding the way power and authority have been exercised in the church, sometimes abusively; and he offers a way of resolving some of the arguments about the language used of God. There is also some overlap between his navigator metaphor with the image of 'the shepherd' which is the most common New Testament metaphor of leaders exercising oversight, and which links back to a central Old Testament metaphor, for example in Ezekiel 34.⁷⁸

Greenwood concedes that 'No metaphor says it all'.⁷⁹ However, he seems to over-invest in the single metaphor of the navigator in his attempt to capture the episcopal task.⁸⁰ (I note that Jesus uses multiple metaphors of himself, especially in John's Gospel, and that the New Testament authors use multiple images of the church.) In this respect, John Pritchard does a better job of trying to set out the task of ministry, by providing sixteen different metaphors or images of today's priest.⁸¹ The drawback is that one ends his book feeling somewhat overwhelmed – and in danger of succumbing to the old idea of the professional, omni-competent priest which Heywood and others strongly critique.⁸² Although some of Pritchard's images connect with the episcopal task, such as the 'creative leader, scanning the horizon', the 'mature risk-taker, thinking outside the box', and the 'flower arranger, managing the church's life', sadly Pritchard does not make any

⁷⁵ Graham Cray, *Discerning Leadership: Cooperating with the Go-Between God* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2010), p.3

⁷⁶ Malcolm Torry, 'Being and Doing: The Priest in the Parish,' in Malcolm Torry (ed.), *The Parish: People, Place and Ministry – A Theological and Practical Exploration* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004), pp.160-171

⁷⁷ Greenwood, *Parish Priests*, p.119

⁷⁸ See John Truscott, 'The leader as shepherd: part 1 – Biblical research', published January 2006, available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles/The-leader-as-a-shepherd [accessed 18/5/11]

⁷⁹ Greenwood, *Parish Priests*, p.104

⁸⁰ All metaphors both reveal some aspects of the subject and hide others; hence there is a need for multiple metaphors to capture complex ideas. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); and Andrew Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁸¹ John Pritchard, *The Life and Work of a Priest* (London: SPCK, 2007)

⁸² In addition to Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry*, see Justin Lewis-Anthony, *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him* (London: Mowbray, 2009)

direct connection to the concept of *episcopate* or oversight, despite referencing Croft's work.⁸³

A recent work on episcopal ministry by Malcolm Grundy makes a nod towards the idea of *episcopate* being a shared task: 'While the bishop "looks over" (*epi-skope*) the congregations ... so also congregations and all other church agencies and officers share in one mutual concept of "overseeing" and caring for one another.'⁸⁴ Although he repeats the idea elsewhere, he does not significantly develop it, nor begin to explore what it might look like in practice. However, to be fair, his focus and concern is on the role of the bishop and a perceived crisis within the episcopal churches – especially, we can infer, of the Anglican Communion.

I return therefore to Croft, who provides the clearest exposition of *episcopate* as 'the ministry of oversight and leadership as it relates to and is part of the ministry of every ordained person'.⁸⁵ He proposes three aspects to the practice of *episcopate* by a parish priest. The first aspect relates to unity, common life and mission. Part of this is managing the polarity between developing the corporate life of the church, especially its worship, and calling new people to discipleship: the dilemma between focusing on nurture and focusing on outreach.⁸⁶ Part of this aspect is ministering according to the dynamic of the congregational size, which builds on Rothauge's work.⁸⁷ Another element of this aspect is developing vision in a collaborative way, through listening to the group, the local church. And another part is about dealing with change and conflict:

Guiding and guarding the unity of a group of people on a journey will involve helping that community to come to terms with change ... One of the consequences of change in local church life is likely to be at least some conflict. Those charged with *episcopate* ... need to have some understanding of how to handle themselves in situations of potential conflict, how to deal with the difficult emotions conflict is likely to arouse, and how to remain

⁸³ Pritchard, *Life and Work of a Priest*: these are the titles of chapters 12, 15 and 16.

⁸⁴ Malcolm Grundy, *Leadership and Oversight: New Models for Episcopal Ministry* (Mowbray: London, 2011), pp.34-35

⁸⁵ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.142

⁸⁶ See Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvably Problems* (Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 1992). Johnson distinguishes between problems that can be solved and polarities that need to be managed. In Roy M. Oswald and Barry Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute 2009), the authors identify one of the classic polarities facing congregations as 'inreach' versus 'outreach', which matches the one identified by Croft.

⁸⁷ Arlin Rothauge, *Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry* (New York, NY: The Episcopal Church Center, 1990)

ministers of reconciliation for the whole congregation during a period of turmoil in parts of it.⁸⁸

Croft's comments here are especially pertinent to the enquiry of this project. He does not develop the idea further, nor does he recognise the need to address low-level conflict and disagreement, but he does helpfully make the link between the episcopal task and engaging with conflict and difficult emotions.

Croft sees the second aspect of the episcopal dimension relating to collaborative working and enabling the ministry of others. Part of this is about equipping church members for ministry for the whole of life, given that the vocation of most church members will be expressed through their daily work.⁸⁹ Croft then goes on to explore resourcing people for ministry that is specific to the life of the church. He begins this by asserting that *episcopus* in this context is a shared responsibility:

A Parochial Church Council has legal and theological responsibilities for oversight of the life of a congregation in partnership with the incumbent. The wise incumbent will take care to set up a small body of people who will share in the oversight either of the whole church or different areas of ministry, and particularly the oversight and development of lay volunteer ministry within the congregation. This small group might go by a number of different names: standing committee; extended staff meeting; leadership team; or even elders meeting ... one of its key functions, in addition to handling questions of overall vision and direction, will be shared oversight of ministry, both policies and personnel.⁹⁰

Croft thus identifies a potentially significant role for the staff team of a large church in sharing oversight with the incumbent. (It is worth noting, however, that English church consultant John Truscott, for one, would challenge whether the staff team should be responsible for questions of overall vision and direction, and would see this resting firmly with the Parochial Church Council, in an Anglican context.)⁹¹

Croft spells out further elements of 'good practice' in relation to the second aspect of episcopal ministry.⁹² These include differentiating tasks and

⁸⁸ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.163

⁸⁹ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.167. This is a primary concern of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, whose purpose is 'Equipping Christians and churches for whole-life discipleship in the world.' See London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (n.d.) www.licc.org.uk/ [accessed 12/8/13].

⁹⁰ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, pp.170-171

⁹¹ John Truscott, 'Should the staff lead the church?', published August 2009, available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes/Should-the-Staff-lead-the-church [accessed 18/5/11]

⁹² Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, pp.170-179

responsibilities, especially by setting up and overseeing different types of teams and groupings of team leaders. Then there is a movement from ‘an ethos of volunteers to an ethos of vocation’, that looks to identify people’s gifting rather than just a willingness to do a job.⁹³ Next is setting in place adequate safeguards for work that the church does with children, within the national legal framework. There is then the work of delegating manageable and clearly defined tasks to others. Next is the provision of a high level of ongoing support for lay leaders. Finally there is undertaking regular review of all the activity that is happening in the life of the church, and ensuring that those with leadership responsibilities take adequate rest, and renew themselves, including through taking sabbatical times away from their responsibilities. A key point to register is that these activities are not done alone, but by the incumbent in conjunction with others, for, ‘Undoubtedly *episcopate* is stronger in a local church if it is exercised collaboratively by a vicar and PCC together; or an incumbent with an extended staff meeting including ordained and lay members.’⁹⁴

Croft concludes his review of the episcopal dimension of ministry with a third aspect, that of watching over oneself and others – although his primary attention is given to watching over oneself. He recognises that the bishop and diocese have certain responsibilities to provide care for clergy, while acknowledging that this will only ever be limited, and therefore it is important for an incumbent to put in place a range of other support mechanisms. Croft goes on to recommend seeking peer support, both through deanery structures and through other ‘clergy clusters’ (which could presumably be self-developed, for example by a group of peers who trained together at the same time). He spells out certain essential ingredients for this peer support to be effective: time spent on relationship building; study together around a common theme; work at self-disclosure; worship together; a leadership structure for the group; and mutuality in the support provided.⁹⁵ Croft indicates that a staff team could function as this form of peer support, and so his ingredients could function as essential ingredients in an effective staff team.

Croft goes on to highlight the need for the individual minister to take responsibility for their own support, because of the limits of other support that may be available. He particularly highlights the value of having both a spiritual director,

⁹³ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.176

⁹⁴ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.155

⁹⁵ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, pp.183-185

and a mentor or work consultant. (And although he does not specifically mention it, this would surely include taking time out for a regular retreat. John Stott comments how this practice ‘saved my life and my ministry’.⁹⁶ John Truscott offers one model.⁹⁷) Croft concludes this aspect of episcopal ministry by pointing to the importance of ministers continually working at developing their own self-awareness, for example through maintaining a journal to provide material that can be reviewed with a spiritual director or work consultant.

The importance of ‘watching over oneself’ is evident from Yvonne Warren’s empirical research drawing on interviews with sixty Anglican clergy in two different Church of England dioceses.⁹⁸ Warren paints a detailed picture of how clergy view their calling, their attitudes to authority, their view of the priesthood, how they exercise leadership, their health and wellbeing, and how they are cared for. Her research points to some significant levels of stress among clergy, often as a result of either internal or external conflicts, and a lack of adequate support.⁹⁹ Her work thereby illustrates the value of recent publications providing guidance on ways of finding support and avoiding burnout.¹⁰⁰

Croft concludes his review of episcopal ministry by talking about the need to balance the three dimensions of ministry (diaconal, presbyteral and episcopal) and noting how the balance will change for an individual minister over time and as they change specific role. He commends Charles Handy’s idea of having ‘a portfolio of different kinds of work’, rather than thinking about the priestly role as a single one.¹⁰¹ He points out that ‘too many clergy have only one file in their mental portfolio of work: the file of “ministry” or “priesthood”’.¹⁰² Thinking in terms of a three-fold portfolio of diaconal, presbyteral and episcopal can help clergy to differentiate out aspects of their ministry, and enable them to prioritise

⁹⁶ John R.W. Stott, *The Living Church: The Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), p.184

⁹⁷ John Truscott, ‘Creating space for a planning retreat’, published March 2010, available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes/Creating-space-for-a-Planning-Retreat [accessed 18/5/11]

⁹⁸ Yvonne Warren, *The Cracked Pot: The State of Today’s Anglican Parish Clergy* (Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew, 2002)

⁹⁹ Warren, *Cracked Pot*, pp.156-210

¹⁰⁰ Nick Helm and Philip Allin (eds), *Finding Support in Ministry* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002); and Geoff Read, *Ministry Burnout* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2009)

¹⁰¹ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.189

¹⁰² Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.189

better. This seems helpful – and more manageable and graspable than the sixteen categories that Pritchard offers.¹⁰³

One of the features of a new understanding of ministry, described above, is that ministry today is fundamentally collaborative in nature, and that this can be seen as of the essence of ministry. I have already noted Croft's observation that the new demands of ministry today mean that 'A cluster of skills which ... we will call enabling or collaborative leadership skills has now become one of the primary skills of those who exercise their ordained ministry in the local church'.¹⁰⁴ Drawing on Daniel Hardy's ecclesiology, Greenwood claims that 'the spirit and practice of collaborative ministry ... is more than an optional aspect of church but is inherent in the Christian faith itself'.¹⁰⁵ David Robertson makes a similar claim.¹⁰⁶ Further, Robertson asserts that collaborative ministry is 'the right way to be church'.¹⁰⁷ According to Heywood, a key basis for these arguments is that 'collaborative ministry honours the witness of the New Testament', which models plural leadership.¹⁰⁸ On a more practical note, Sally Nash and others have helpfully tried to spell out the range of skills that might be required for collaborative ministry.¹⁰⁹

At the same time there is not a full consensus on the value of this focus on a collaborative approach to ministry. Justin Lewis-Anthony expresses some concerns about what he sees as the current over-focus on collaborative ministry.¹¹⁰ However, his main complaint is that there is inadequate exploration of and guidance about what collaborative ministry looks like in practice. (Interestingly, despite an extensive bibliography, he does not cite Sally Nash et al.'s work, which in part addresses his concerns. Possibly it was published after his own text had been submitted for publication.) He is concerned that many interpret collaborative ministry to mean that all decisions in the parish should be made on a consensus basis. He offers a justifiable critique of this, and illustrates how different types of

¹⁰³ Pritchard, *Life and Work of a Priest*, pp.11-160

¹⁰⁴ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.16

¹⁰⁵ Greenwood, *Parish Priests*, p.28

¹⁰⁶ 'Collaborative ministry is neither a management technique nor a facet of delegation: it is the organic, incarnational living out of New Testament promise, given life by the presence of the Holy Spirit.' David Robertson, *Collaborative Ministry: What it Is, How it Works and Why* (Oxford: BRF, 2007), p.205

¹⁰⁷ Robertson, *Collaborative Ministry*, p.206

¹⁰⁸ Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry*, p.189

¹⁰⁹ Sally Nash, Jo Pimlott and Paul Nash, *Skills for Collaborative Ministry* (London: SPCK, 2008)

¹¹⁰ Justin Lewis-Anthony, *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him: Radically Re-Thinking Priestly Ministry* (London: Mowbray, 2009), pp.188-204

decision need different approaches to decision-making. This is in fact well recognised even by those who are strong advocates for more consensual decision-making processes.¹¹¹

Despite Lewis-Anthony's reservations, we are left with the conclusion that collaborative ministry is at the heart of a faithful understanding of ministry today, as Stephen Pickard asserts:

“To collaborate or not to collaborate” is never a question in pastoral ministry. To ask the question is to lose sight of the fundamental reality of what the Church is and who we are formed to be in the purposes of God. Rather the Church is called repeatedly to actualise in its life collaborative practices that bear witness to its life in the triune God.¹¹²

4. Literature on Church Staff Teams and Their Meetings

The available literature on church staff teams and their meetings is very limited, and is mostly North American, although there are three short booklets from a British context, all in the Grove booklet series, which are relevant and to which we turn first. Chris Skilton looks at some of the issues raised by having leadership teams made up of clergy and lay people in the local church.¹¹³ He considers some biblical models and theological considerations, and looks at certain issues to be addressed, such as how leadership is exercised, the relationships between clergy and lay members and with statutory bodies such as the Parochial Church Council. He raises a few pertinent points on meetings, indicating that consideration needs to be given to the location of the meeting, to how the agenda is assembled and how notes are kept, but these reflections are very limited. Andrew Dawswell covers similar territory to Skilton but in relation to ‘ministry leadership teams’, addressing the situation where a group of clergy serve a number of congregations.¹¹⁴ However, he has even less to say on some of the practicalities, such as meetings of the team. Of more practical help is John Leach's booklet on Parochial Church Councils.¹¹⁵ He addresses the

¹¹¹ A similar point is made in: Alice M. Price, ‘The Decision Rule’, in Carolyn Schrock-Shenk (ed.), *Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual: Foundation Skills for Constructive Conflict Transformation* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Conciliation Service, 2000⁴), pp.216-217

¹¹² Stephen Pickard, *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p.232

¹¹³ Chris Skilton, *Leadership Teams: Clergy and Lay Leadership in the Local Church* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999)

¹¹⁴ Dawswell, *Ministry Leadership Teams*

¹¹⁵ John Leach, *Divine Oversight? Renewing Your Church Councils* (Cambridge: Grove, 2007). This

value of personality and role tests in helping group members to recognise and appreciate their diversity and the different strengths that group members have to offer. He sets out the need for a structured and detailed agenda for effective meetings. He offers a structure for problem-solving issues discussed by the group, and considers the merits of different decision rules. Although geared to the needs of a church council, much of what Leach offers could helpfully be used and adapted by the staff team of a large church.

A final British contribution worth a mention comes from John Pritchard, the current Bishop of Oxford. Although he provides only one brief paragraph on the topic, he does offer some important insights on church meetings generally:

The meetings in our church life belong to God and should be infused with God's presence both by the way prayer embraces them and the way the meeting is conducted. A balanced agenda, clarity about the status of each agenda item (report, discussion, decision), preparation by the Chair, clear introductions and conclusions, a known time-frame, participation – all these are good principles. It might be good to have a period of quiet reflection and prayer built into some discussions and a lit candle reminding everyone of the presence of the living Christ. By the end of the meeting we want people to feel that decisions were taken because 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...' (Acts 15:28).¹¹⁶

Even if this condensed advice was the only guidance that incumbents and other ministers in the Church of England followed, it would transform many unproductive meetings.

In order to find more extensive resources, we therefore need to turn to the available North American literature. Even here the resources are limited with only one text which adequately addresses the needs of the staff team of a large church, which is Gil Rendle and Susan Beaumont's book, *When Moses Meets Aaron*. They make the observation that 'One of the consequences of [the] rapid growth in the number of large congregations is a lack of training and tools available for senior clergy to lead these large congregations'.¹¹⁷ Their book looks to fill this significant gap, and provides a detailed handbook on issues around the staffing and supervision of staff in large churches. This includes a whole chapter on staff meetings, and is the most helpful such published resource of everything I

is more extensive than the limited practical guidance for PCC meetings provided in James Behrens, *Practical Church Management: A Guide for Every Parish* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), pp.44-48

¹¹⁶ Pritchard, *The Life and Work of a Priest*, pp.142-143

¹¹⁷ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.1

encountered. Hence this will prove a key reference point throughout this dissertation. Susan Beaumont has written a more recent book on large churches, but while this helpfully explores staff team design and function, it does not cover the details of staff meetings in the way that her earlier book does.¹¹⁸

A more limited but still helpful resource is Harold Westing's *Church Staff Handbook*, which has a constructive chapter on staff meetings, and among other things highlights the value of staff team members sharing their personal lives with one another.¹¹⁹ A book coming from a Southern Baptist perspective, which seeks to focus on team-building (in contrast to being task-driven), also tries to provide some useful guidance on the practicalities of team meetings.¹²⁰ Other titles on staff teams address some of the dynamics, role issues and organisational aspects of teams, but do not consider any of the practicalities of team meetings.¹²¹ Likewise a couple of books that advocate for the benefits of team ministry offer a constructive vision of team ministry, but do not address practicalities such as how to run team meetings.¹²² Strangely the lengthy 550-page volume, *Leadership Handbook of Management and Administration*, has only two or three paragraphs on staff meetings.¹²³ Much more helpful is a DMin thesis which surveys some of the current literature, and offers guidance for a senior pastor on leading staff team meetings.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ Susan Beaumont, *Inside the Large Congregation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2011)

¹¹⁹ Harold J. Westing, *Church Staff Handbook: How to Build an Effective Ministry Team* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1997²), pp.135-145

¹²⁰ Frank R. Lewis, *The Team Builder: A Pastor's Resource for Increased Effectiveness in Developing and Leading the Church Staff* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1997), pp.91-103

¹²¹ Mitchell, *Multiple Staff Ministries*; Anne Marie Nuechterlein, *Improving Your Multiple Staff Ministry: How to Work Together More Effectively* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989); Gary L. McIntosh, *Staff Your Church for Growth: Building Team Ministry in the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000)

¹²² George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999); E. Stanley Ott, *Transform Your Church with Ministry Teams* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004)

¹²³ See Don Cousins, 'Managing Staff' in James D. Berkley (ed.) *Leadership Handbook of Management and Administration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), pp.276-283

¹²⁴ Keith E. Robinson, 'The Senior Pastor's Role and Responsibilities in Leading a Pastoral Staff', unpublished DMin thesis, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, Lynchburg, Virginia, April 2010. There is another relevant DMin thesis which I was unable to obtain sight of: James L. Davis, 'Team Leadership: A Twenty-First Century Guide for Senior Pastors Overseeing a Multiple Staff', unpublished DMin thesis, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, Missouri, 2001

5. Literature on Processes, Tools and Techniques for Facilitating Meetings and Resolving Conflict

The Mennonite trainer and facilitator Ron Kraybill provides a helpful distillation of some key insights into facilitating meetings in his article ‘Ten Commandments of Meeting Facilitation’.¹²⁵ His first commandment is: ‘Thou shalt begin with an agenda that establishes the purpose and structure of thy entire meeting.’ As Catherine Widdicombe, an English religious sister, points out in her highly practical resource book, *Meetings that Work: A Practical Guide to Teamworking in Groups*, the agenda ‘may be draw up by the chairperson or secretary, alone or together’, or in consultation with other group members; or in less formal contexts, the agenda may be formed at the start of when the group meets together.¹²⁶ Rendle and Beaumont see following a standard format as one of four key practices of productive and effective staff meetings.¹²⁷ The field research therefore explored the issue of how the agenda was established for the staff team meetings that were observed.

Kraybill’s second meeting facilitation commandment is: ‘Thou shalt center they discussion around one issue at a time; no other issue shalt thou consider.’¹²⁸ Kraybill is here making reference to one of the abiding problems with meetings, helpfully diagnosed by Michael Doyle and David Strauss in their book, *How to Make Meetings Work*.¹²⁹ (The fact that this text is still in print after thirty-six years is testimony to its enduring value.) Doyle and Strauss flag up the tendency for a group to drift into discussing multiple items at once, and thus the need for a chair person or group facilitator to keep the focus on a single issue at a time. So one of the items that the observation process looked to record was whether the chair person kept the discussion focussed on one issue, when there was an attempt by a team member to draw in another issue.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Ron Kraybill, ‘Ten Commandments of Meeting Facilitation’ in Carolyn Schrock-Shenk (ed.), *Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual: Foundation Skills for Constructive Conflict Transformation* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Conciliation Service, 2000⁴), pp.219-220

¹²⁶ Catherine Widdicombe, *Meetings that Work: A Practical Guide to Teamworking in Groups* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2000), p.152

¹²⁷ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, pp.195-196

¹²⁸ Kraybill, ‘Ten Commandments of Meeting Facilitation’, p.219

¹²⁹ Michael Doyle and David Strauss, *How to Make Meetings Work* (New York, NY: Jove Books, 1976), pp.20-24

¹³⁰ See Appendix 5: Observation Schedule for the Research Project

Kraybill's fourth meeting facilitation commandment is: 'Thou shalt exercise thy leadership through frequent summary of thy participants' contributions.'¹³¹ As Kraybill points out, such summaries can take one of two forms: either a paraphrase of what one speaker has said, or a group summary which captures the range of comments from several speakers. As Roger Schwarz indicates, 'Paraphrasing involves taking a group member's words and using different words to convey essentially the same meaning'.¹³² Kraybill asserts that, 'Summaries should occur frequently, always at the end of discussion of an issue, and often several times within each issue'. Widdicombe provides a rationale to back up Kraybill's assertion. She highlights that 'Making a summary of a discussion ... can be of enormous benefit in a group'.¹³³ She spells out six different benefits, including helping members re-focus on the topic, getting everyone to the same level of understanding, highlighting the main points or key issues, and moving the discussion to the next stage.

Among some of the other benefits that I am aware of from my work with Bridge Builders, summarising also helps to clarify the nature of any disagreement and the range of views expressed on the issue under discussion, and to establish what follow-up action is going to be taken. It also helps to clarify where the discussion has got to, when time has run out, before explaining how the matter will be taken forward at a future meeting. However, Widdicombe also explains that summarising is 'a complex activity' and a skill that needs intentional development and practice.¹³⁴

The value of summarising is also highlighted in a helpful web article on chairing meetings, which also draws out a core part of what the skill involves:

Summarizing can be used to end a topic, to end a discussion, to limit the need for discussion and at the end of a meeting to ensure that everyone has a clear overview of what took place or what action is now required. It is an invaluable skill for a chairman. Summarizing requires active listening. You have to state concisely what was said in an impartial way and end with a clear statement about what is expected to happen next. It takes practice to summarize well, but it is a skill well worth developing.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Kraybill, 'Ten Commandments of Meeting Facilitation', p.219

¹³² Roger Schwarz, *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), p.187

¹³³ Widdicombe, *Meetings that Work*, p.111

¹³⁴ Widdicombe, *Meetings that Work*, p.111

¹³⁵ Codence Innovations (n.d.), 'Chairing a meeting' available at www.meetingwizard.org/meetings/chairing-meetings.cfm [accessed 17/5/11]

Likewise, a contemporary business handbook on how to manage meetings also affirms the value of summarising at different points within a meeting.¹³⁶ So given the evident significance of summarising, one of the items that the observation process looked to record was whether the chair person summarised or checked his or her understanding of someone else's expressed view, and whether he or she summarised the range of views expressed in the group. In addition, the observation process looked to record whether the chair person summarised or restated the proposed resolution, outcome or process of the item that had been discussed.¹³⁷

Kraybill's fifth meeting facilitation commandment is: 'Thou shalt not allow vocal participants to dominate thy assembly. As many speakers as possible shalt thou hear.'¹³⁸ Again, the literature highlights that a common problem with meetings can be a dominant member of the group who tries to hog the discussion. Widdicombe provides detailed reflection questions and intervention strategies to help address this problem.¹³⁹ Therefore another item that the observations sought to record was whether the chair person solicited other peoples' views on the issue, that is people who had not yet spoken – this being one simple strategy to address to the problem of a dominant group member.¹⁴⁰

Kraybill's eighth meeting facilitation commandment is: 'Thou shalt value diversity; yea thou shalt invite disagreement, for in this lieth the strength of thy group and the purpose of thy calling.'¹⁴¹ Kraybill is picking up on the danger of 'group-think' and how important exploring diversity is in discerning a wise way forward, a theme explored in some depth by James Surowiecki.¹⁴² Another writer on team meetings, Patrick Lencioni asserts that 'When a group of intelligent people come together to talk about issues that matter, it is both natural and productive for disagreement to occur. Resolving those issues is what makes a meeting productive, engaging, even fun.'¹⁴³ He therefore sees a need for the chair or facilitator of a

¹³⁶ Alan Barker, *How to Manage Meetings* (London: Kogan Page, 2002), pp.61-62

¹³⁷ See Appendix 5: Observation Schedule for the Research Project

¹³⁸ Kraybill, 'Ten Commandments of Meeting Facilitation', p.219

¹³⁹ Widdicombe, *Meetings that Work*, pp.138-139

¹⁴⁰ See Appendix 5: Observation Schedule for the Research Project

¹⁴¹ Kraybill, 'Ten Commandments of Meeting Facilitation', p.220

¹⁴² James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few* (London: Abacus, 2004)

¹⁴³ Patrick M. Lencioni, *Death by Meeting: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2004), p.229

meeting to ‘mine’ for conflict, and to ‘make it a priority to seek out and uncover important issues about which team members do not agree’, forcing team members to engage with those issues, even at the risk of unpopularity.¹⁴⁴ Therefore the observation process sought to record whether the chair person did any of the following: welcomed differences of opinion being expressed; acknowledged a difference of opinion when it arose; (as already indicated) sought to solicit a range of views from different people; and invited disagreement on a proposed resolution or process.¹⁴⁵

Kraybill’s tenth meeting facilitation commandment is: ‘Thou shalt not surprise thy group with any conclusions, rather thou shalt test conclusions before they are final.’¹⁴⁶ Kraybill is here referring to the problem of group members feeling that a conclusion they were not expecting has been bounced on them by the chair person. Susan Shearouse points out that the facilitator of a meeting ‘should remember that silence does not mean consent’.¹⁴⁷ To overcome the assumption, Shearouse explains how it can therefore be beneficial to use a straw poll or straw vote of some kind to test the level of consensus. This will help the chair person to uncover ‘puzzlement or dissent that might not have surfaced’.¹⁴⁸ In a small group such as a church staff team, it may be enough for the chair person simply to check whether everyone is on board with the conclusion or decision that has been reached, or to ask whether anyone has any reservations about the direction proposed. Therefore the observation process sought to record whether the chair person invited disagreement or tested for consensus on a proposed resolution or process.¹⁴⁹

The above items reflect some of the key meeting facilitation skills which Bridge Builders teaches, and which I therefore wanted to see what use was made of during the staff team meetings which were observed. There is also a basic conflict resolution idea which Bridge Builders teaches which is the distinction between the positions that people take and their underlying concerns, and the need to seek to address underlying concerns in order to find a way forward when people’s positions

¹⁴⁴ Lencioni, *Death by Meeting*, p.230

¹⁴⁵ See Appendix 5: Observation Schedule for the Research Project

¹⁴⁶ Kraybill, ‘Ten Commandments of Meeting Facilitation’, p.220

¹⁴⁷ Susan H. Shearouse, ‘Straw Poll: Testing for Consensus’ in Carolyn Schrock-Shenk (ed.), *Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual: Foundation Skills for Constructive Conflict Transformation* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Conciliation Service, 2000⁴), p.232

¹⁴⁸ Gaylord Noyce, *Church Meetings That Work* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1994), p.40

¹⁴⁹ See Appendix 5: Observation Schedule for the Research Project

appear to be mutually exclusive or in conflict. This concept was popularised by Roger Fisher and William Ury in their seminal text, *Getting to Yes*.¹⁵⁰ This relatively basic conflict resolution concept is still not widely understood among British church leaders, despite being picked up by British authors.¹⁵¹ (This statement is made on the basis of my experience working with Bridge Builders, where we regularly introduce the concept as part of our training courses and continue to encounter many clergy who find the concept new. These course participants also affirm the value of the idea, once it has been introduced to them.) Therefore the observation process sought to record whether the chair person articulated or tried to surface the underlying concerns/needs behind a position, and whether he or she generated ideas that addressed underlying concerns or needs.¹⁵²

Another common problem in meetings which is noted by Doyle and Strauss is the lack of clarity about process, and the need to distinguish between content and process.¹⁵³ The content is the topic or issue under discussion, while the process is the approach, method or procedure used to explore the topic or issue. As Doyle and Strauss point out, this is a ‘vitally important concept to grasp if you are going to understand why meetings don’t work well’. Therefore I looked to pay attention to this during the observation process, although it was not specifically marked as an item in the Observation Schedule.

The most helpful texts on facilitating meetings are covered above, but there are a couple of others worth mentioning which might be relevant to incumbents and their staff teams. Gaylord Noyce has a book specifically on church meetings, which sets out the value of meetings, and helpfully summarises some of the dynamics to watch out for in groups.¹⁵⁴ English church consultant John Truscott has an article on how to chair meetings, which offers some similar but more succinct guidance to Widdicombe’s book, using an orchestral metaphor as the guiding image.¹⁵⁵ Truscott’s article is stronger than an equivalent North American article available online.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰ Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating an Agreement without Giving In* (London: Arrow Books, 1981)

¹⁵¹ For example, Nash et al., *Skills for Collaborative Ministry*, pp.115-117

¹⁵² See Appendix 5: Observation Schedule for the Research Project

¹⁵³ Doyle and Strauss, *How to Make Meetings Work*, pp.24-25

¹⁵⁴ Noyce, *Church Meetings That Work*

¹⁵⁵ John Truscott, ‘How to chair meetings: an orchestral approach’, published September 2003, available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles/How-to-chair-meetings [accessed 17/5/11]

¹⁵⁶ John Sommerville, ‘How to Run a Great Staff Meeting’, posted 1/1/04, available at

Another general text on meetings is also worth a mention: Patrick Lencioni's delightfully titled *Death by Meeting*.¹⁵⁷ Lencioni offers the important insight that teams need different types of meeting, and he proposes four different types that look to achieve different purposes: a short (five-minute) daily check-in to clarify team members' priorities for the day; a weekly tactical meeting that addresses issues of immediate concern facing the team; a monthly strategic meeting to address bigger issues that need to be addressed; and a quarterly off-site review, to take a more holistic, longer-term view of a team's work. While this structure might need some adaptation for a staff team which includes part-time and voluntary workers, the principle of having different types of meeting to address different types of agenda is one that any staff team of a larger church might want to consider if they want to improve their effectiveness as a group. Finally, although not specifically relevant to the facilitation of team meetings, Lencioni also has another title which addresses some of the important dynamics of staff team life, and which an incumbent and team members are likely to find worth reflecting on together.¹⁵⁸

www.christianitytoday.com/le/2004/winter/21.75.html [accessed 11/5/11]

¹⁵⁷ Lencioni, *Death by Meeting*. Also of value for church staff teams is his book on teams: Patrick M. Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2002)

¹⁵⁸ Patrick M. Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2002)

III. Research Methods and Process

This chapter begins by explaining the overall method and flow of the project set out in the remainder of this dissertation, and then goes on to outline other approaches to theological reflection and practical theology, explaining why those approaches were not chosen. The third section surveys the related academic research, to help set this project in context. The fourth section explains the choice of the ethnographic methods employed in the data collection in the field research. The subsequent sections chart the extended journey of setting up and undertaking the field research, provide a description of the two teams selected as case studies, address ethical issues faced, and assess the impact of the researcher's presence as a participant observer. These latter sections seek to provide an insight into the process of the field research and to demonstrate that the process was conducted in an appropriate and ethical manner by the researcher, with attentiveness to relevant research issues. Aside from providing suitable accountability to the examiners, the report may hopefully also be of assistance to any researcher looking to conduct similar research in future.

1. Overall Method of the Research Project

The overall method and flow of the research project set out in this dissertation follows David Kolb's 'learning cycle' in terms of reflection on experience and practice.¹⁵⁹ It also follows a practical theology method, that of the 'pastoral cycle', or what Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward designate as 'theology-in-action' in their survey of methods of theological reflection.¹⁶⁰ It will be helpful to explain briefly the connection with the learning cycle and the pastoral cycle, in order to locate the structure of this research on the wider canvas of learning and reflection methods.

Kolb developed his learning cycle based on the conviction that 'learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience'.¹⁶¹ In simplified form, Kolb's learning cycle moves from concrete

¹⁵⁹ David Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984)

¹⁶⁰ Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), pp.170-199

¹⁶¹ David Kolb, *Experiential Learning*, p.38

experiencing of an experience, on to reflective observation, then to abstract conceptualising, before active experimentation that begins the cycle afresh. As Judith Thompson et al. note, at its simplest this is a movement from: seeing to reflecting to acting.¹⁶² In the case of this research project, the movement is from observing an aspect of the practice of Christian ministry (how certain ministers deal with their disagreements, in terms of the processes they use and the outcomes they reach, and what use they make of certain tools and techniques) to analysing what has been observed, to then reflecting on this theologically, before pointing to some next steps for action. Kolb's learning cycle has been criticised and, like any model, it has its limitations.¹⁶³ However, it has proved an enduring reference point for exploring learning from experience, and it therefore seems an appropriate model to follow in a professional doctorate dissertation.¹⁶⁴

The pastoral cycle shares some close similarities with Kolb's learning cycle. Originally the pastoral cycle derives from a method developed by liberation theologians in Latin America which 'places primacy on *orthopraxis* (right action) rather than *orthodoxy* (right belief)' in which the 'struggle for human emancipation' is used as the yardstick for assessing the rightness of action.¹⁶⁵ Subsequently, the pastoral cycle 'has been widely used in theological education' albeit sometimes in adapted form.¹⁶⁶ However it is presented, there is general agreement that there are four stages to the pastoral cycle.¹⁶⁷ The first stage is immersion in a particular context and exposure to its economic and political realities. The second stage is a social analysis of what is encountered in a particular context. The third stage is a hermeneutical or theological reflection, in which the gospel's perspective and critique is brought to bear. The final stage is one of pastoral planning in an effort to develop a more faithful practice in light of the work done in the earlier stages.

The pattern of the pastoral cycle within this research project is: a first stage of immersion in the experience of an aspect of pastoral practice, namely a staff team's meetings, through extended direct observation; the second stage is an

¹⁶² Judith Thompson, with Stephen Pattison and Ross Thompson, *SCM Study Guide to Theological Reflection* (London: SCM Press, 2008), p.21

¹⁶³ Jennifer Moon, *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice* (Abingdon: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), pp.114-115

¹⁶⁴ Moon, *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning*, pp.103-120

¹⁶⁵ Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, p.170

¹⁶⁶ Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, p.188

¹⁶⁷ Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, p.188-191

analysis of that observation and experience; the third stage is a theological reflection and a bringing to bear of the wider Christian tradition, as a normative corrective to what has been observed; and the final stage is pointing to future action, or at least implications for future action. This form of the pastoral cycle would seem to be an appropriate model to follow for a DMin dissertation, where one is looking to bring theological reflection to bear on professional practice.

2. Alternative Methods Not Selected

Graham, Walton and Ward set out seven different methods of theological reflection.¹⁶⁸ Although they do not set out a distinction between theological reflection and practical theology, potentially all of these methods can be taken as ways of doing practical theology, and it may be worth outlining why the other methods were not selected for this research project. The first method is designated as ‘theology by heart’ which ‘looks to the self and the interior life as the primary space in which theological awareness is generated’.¹⁶⁹ This method might have been an appropriate one to use if several of the members of the staff teams were keeping journals about their team meetings and open to sharing these with a researcher, but there was no indication that this was the case – nor indeed would it have been a likely scenario. The second method Graham et al. document is ‘speaking in parables’ or constructive narrative theology.¹⁷⁰ This method might be appropriate to a context where the participants are involved in a process of telling stories to make sense of their experience, but would not have been appropriate to exploring the realities of practice within staff team meetings.

The third method identified by Graham and her colleagues is ‘telling God’s story’ or canonical narrative theology, which ‘regards the Christian faith as God’s self-narrated story told through the life and death of Jesus Christ’.¹⁷¹ This approach is certainly one that might be useful within the theological reflection stage of the pastoral cycle, but it does not readily lend itself to being used as an overall method for empirical, qualitative research. Graham’s fourth method is ‘writing the body of Christ’ or corporate theological reflection which explores how ‘the faith

¹⁶⁸ Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*

¹⁶⁹ Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, p.18

¹⁷⁰ Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, p.47

¹⁷¹ Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, p.78

community can construct a sense of corporate identity through the use of a central metaphor, or symbolic practices . . . , or by creating a narrative that tells the story of its ongoing life'.¹⁷² One modern example of this method that Graham et al. cite is that provided by James Hopewell.¹⁷³ This method might well have been appropriate if one had the time and capacity to undertake a full-scale congregational study of the type that Hopewell, Guest and McLintock Fulkerson have modelled.¹⁷⁴ However, as indicated in Chapter I above, a research project of that scale is well beyond what could be undertaken within the scope of a DMin project, and was thus not a realistic proposition here.

The fifth method set out by Graham et al. is that of 'speaking of God in public' or critical correlation, which 'emphasises the importance of theology's engagement with contemporary culture, be that philosophical, aesthetic, political or scientific'.¹⁷⁵ This method is a fruitful one for engaging with new developments in contemporary culture, but it is not well fitted to exploring particular practices of ministry within the church, of the kind that this research project wanted to explore. Finally, the seventh method outlined by Graham, Walton and Ward is that of 'theology in the vernacular' or local theologies, an approach which 'demonstrates that theology is culturally, temporally and spatially located, and that the gospel cannot exist independent of particular, embodied expression'.¹⁷⁶ This is an approach which is particularly helpful for offering insight from minority groups or cultures whose perspective has been neglected by traditional western theology. However, it has much less relevance to the type of project undertaken here.

As can be seen from the above survey, it is perhaps unsurprising that Graham et al.'s sixth method, of 'theology-in-action', drawing on the pastoral cycle, is the one that has been chosen for this project. As Ballard and Pritchard point out, the pastoral cycle has also been 'widely used in practical theology' with 'a number of variations on the theme' due to its flexibility.¹⁷⁷ It also has some similarities with the method of practical theological reflection adopted by Swinton and Mowat.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷² Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, p.109

¹⁷³ Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structure*

¹⁷⁴ Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture*; McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*

¹⁷⁵ Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, p.138

¹⁷⁶ Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, p.200

¹⁷⁷ Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 1996), p.74

¹⁷⁸ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, pp.93-97

Although Swinton and Mowat do not make explicit the overlap with the pastoral cycle, their process is similar: beginning with identifying a practice or situation that requires reflection and critical challenge; moving to apply qualitative research questions; then moving to offer critical reflection on the practices of the church in the light of scripture and tradition; and then completing the cycle by developing revised forms of faithful practice. The above review therefore illustrates the suitability of the pastoral cycle as the overarching method for this research project.

3. Related Academic Research

One of the challenges of this research project was that it was breaking fairly new ground, and there were no similar research projects with which to make any direct comparisons, whether in a church or other setting. However, a search of major databases revealed some related research of interest, which helps to set the wider academic context for the current project.¹⁷⁹

There is some research which highlights the significance of team meetings on the effectiveness of teams, and thus affirms the value of conducting the type of research proposed here.¹⁸⁰ Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock demonstrate that teams which showed more functional interaction, such as engaging in active problem-solving and action planning, were significantly more satisfied with their meetings; and that those teams which held better meetings were generally more productive as a group. Their finding points to the value of exploring the issue of how teams deal with disagreement in their meetings, and what use they make of facilitation and conflict resolution skills that can make their meetings more effective.

To date there appears to be relatively little research which explores how disagreement is handled in meetings. One paper has looked at how school children reach agreement and handle disagreement, with three main strategies focused on: using persuasion, seeking a compromise, and showing indifference.¹⁸¹ There are two research projects which have explored disagreement in meetings through conducting detailed discourse analysis. McRae's research focusses on the power

¹⁷⁹ The main databases searched were: Google Scholar; JSTOR; OCLC FirstSearch; Oxford Journals Online; and Cambridge Journals Online.

¹⁸⁰ Simone Kauffeld and Nale Lehmann-Willenbrock, 'Meetings Matter: Effects of Team Meetings on Team and Organizational Success', *Small Group Research*, April 2012, **43**(2), pp.130-158

¹⁸¹ Chia-Ling Chiang and Chorng-Jee Guo, 'Different Ways To Reach Agreement and To Handle Disagreement in Science Group Discourse', 1999. Unfortunately only an abstract is available.

and gender dynamics when there is disagreement within a meeting.¹⁸² Yuen's research focusses on how disagreement is expressed within a group of medical colleagues in a laboratory in an Asian context.¹⁸³ He highlights how participants in the meeting usually expressed disagreements indirectly and tacitly either by stating a fact, asking a question or proposing a counter-suggestion; and that explicit disagreement was rare, unless expressed by the chair person, whose position of authority allowed direct and explicit expression of disagreement.

Jo Angouri has conducted some recent research on disagreement in problem-solving discussions in a business meeting context.¹⁸⁴ Angouri suggests, that contrary to earlier work, expression of disagreement (or 'deviating opinions') is not only considered acceptable by business meeting participants, but is seen as an inherent part of the problem-solving process. She also found that it was rare for people to use language which might be perceived as face-threatening or as intentionally impolite. In a special issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics* that explores aspects of disagreement, Angouri and Locher also offer some broader theories about disagreement.¹⁸⁵ They make a number of proposals in an attempt to systematically approach the understanding of disagreement. First, they propose that expressing opposing views is an everyday phenomenon. Second, that disagreement is expected and inevitable when engaging in decision-making and problem-solving both in business and every day contexts. Third, that expressing disagreement cannot be seen as an a priori negative act, as different groups have developed different norms affecting how disagreement is perceived. Fourth, as in all language usage, the ways in which disagreement is expressed will have an impact on relational issues (whether there is perceived to be a loss of face, a maintenance of face or enhancement of face); and that, at the same time, expectations about how disagreement is valued in a particular context will influence how participants choose to express any disagreement. Overall, Angouri's work highlights the relative paucity of research on disagreement, and, given the prevalence and inevitability of disagreement in

¹⁸² Susan S. McRae, 'Language, gender and status in the workplace: the discourse of disagreement in meetings', unpublished PhD thesis, Open University, Milton Keynes, 2004

¹⁸³ Yin Shan Yuen, 'Doing disagreement in the decision-making process of formal meetings: a conversation-analytic study of interactions between colleagues in a medical laboratory', unpublished MPhil thesis, City University of Hong Kong, 2012

¹⁸⁴ Jo Angouri, 'Managing disagreement in problem solving meeting talk', *Journal of Pragmatics*, September 2012, **44** (12), pp.1565–1579

¹⁸⁵ Jo Angouri and Miriam A. Locher, 'Theorising disagreement', *Journal of Pragmatics*, September 2012, **44**(12), pp.1549–1553

decision-making and problem-solving, it suggests that there is merit in the focus of this research project in exploring how disagreement is handled in church staff teams.

Karen Jehn has conducted research exploring intragroup conflict more broadly. Her earliest study examined whether conflict might be beneficial in work groups and management teams.¹⁸⁶ Her results indicated that whether conflict was beneficial depended on the type of conflict and the structure of the group. Relationship and task conflicts were negatively associated with individuals' satisfaction, with whether they liked other group members, and whether they intended to remain in the group. Interestingly (and contrary to what one might expect), norms encouraging open discussion of conflict were not always advantageous – probably because such norms did not of themselves increase group members' ability to deal constructively with the conflicts they faced. This last item points to the possible benefits of skill development in handling disagreement and resolving conflict, and thus validates the focus of the current research project.

A second study by Jehn yielded some similar results.¹⁸⁷ This found that relationship and process conflict is detrimental to performance and satisfaction in teams, while the effect of task conflict on performance was variable depending on the shape of the conflict. In particular, she found that increased emotionality reduces effectiveness and the potential for resolution. She also found that the most effective groups were those with norms that accepted task but not relationship conflict. Working with Mannix, Jehn subsequently carried out further research in a longitudinal study of intragroup conflict and group performance.¹⁸⁸ This found that teams which performed well were characterised by low but increasing levels of process conflict, low levels of relationship conflict (with a rise in this as project deadlines approached), and moderate levels of task conflict at the midpoint of the group's interaction. Teams which fitted this ideal profile had pre-established value systems, high levels of trust and respect, and open discussion norms around conflict during the middle stages of their interaction.

¹⁸⁶ Karen A. Jehn, 'A Multimethod Examination of the Benefits and Detriments of Intragroup Conflict', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, June 1995, **40**(2), pp.256-282

¹⁸⁷ Karen A. Jehn, 'A Qualitative Analysis of Conflict Types and Dimensions in Organizational Groups', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, September 1997, **42**(3), pp.530-557

¹⁸⁸ Karen A. Jehn and Elizabeth A. Mannix, 'The Dynamic Nature of Conflict: A Longitudinal Study of Intragroup Conflict and Group Performance', *The Academy of Management Journal*, April 2001, **44**(2), pp. 238-251

Other research on how conflict is handled in working relationships has focussed on the use of the five modes or methods popularised by Thomas and Kilmann in their Conflict Mode Instrument.¹⁸⁹ They use a two dimensional model comparing assertiveness (defined as the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy their own concerns) and cooperativeness (the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns), which yields five modes of handling conflict which they designate as: competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating and avoiding. Burke conducted some early research using a version of this model, with three different investigations.¹⁹⁰ In the first investigation he found that the forcing and avoiding (which he termed 'withdrawing') approaches were generally ineffective in resolving conflicts between managers and their superiors, the accommodating (which he termed 'smoothing') approach was sometimes effective and sometimes not, and only the collaborative approach (which he termed 'confronting or problem solving') was consistently positive in resolving conflicts. In the second investigation, only the collaborative approach was found to correlate with effective conflict resolution, while the forcing and avoiding approaches were particularly ineffective. Cosier and Ruble's later research affirms the value and benefits of the five-mode model, when compared with a simple two-choice approach.¹⁹¹ More recent research by Farmer and Roth uses the model in examining how conflict is managed within work groups performing decision-making tasks.¹⁹² Their principal finding was that conflict-handling behaviours which reflected a high concern for others (i.e. the collaborative and accommodating modes) occurred most frequently, whereas behaviours which reflected a low concern for others (i.e. the forcing and avoiding modes) occurred least frequently.

¹⁸⁹ Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann, *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (Tuxedo, NY: Xicom, 1974). I had originally planned to make use of this, by having the incumbent and team members complete the instrument, but later abandoned the idea when it became clear there would be too much data to process in this dissertation. Reference to it is retained in the observation schedule, at Appendix 7. Thus I sought to record the approach taken by participants in the meetings observed, when there was a disagreement. However, during the data analysis stage this did not emerge as a particularly fruitful item, and so is not reported on in this dissertation.

¹⁹⁰ Ronald J. Burke, 'Methods of resolving superior-subordinate conflict: the constructive use of subordinate differences and disagreements', *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 1970, **5**(4), pp.393-411

¹⁹¹ Richard A. Cosier and Thomas L. Ruble, 'Research on Conflict-Handling Behavior: An Experimental Approach', *The Academy of Management Journal*, December 1981, **24**(4), pp.816-831

¹⁹² Steven M. Farmer and Jonelle Roth, 'Conflict-Handling Behavior in Work Groups Effects of Group Structure, Decision Processes, and Time', *Small Group Research*, 1998, **29**(6), pp.669-713

Holmes and Marra have explored what good leadership looks like in relation to managing conflict within meetings.¹⁹³ Their analysis found that effective leaders selected from four main strategies for dealing with potential conflict, along a continuum from least to most confrontational. The strategies were: conflict avoidance; diversion; resolution through negotiation; and resolution by authority. Their findings suggest that good leaders manage conflict by choosing strategies which address both their transactional and relational goals in order to achieve a desirable outcome.

Also of related interest on the handling of conflict within religious groups is Susan Robson's work among Quakers.¹⁹⁴ Robson observes that when situations that threaten to generate internal conflict arise among Quakers, they tend to be quickly muted or ignored. She argues that the roots of this conflict-avoiding behaviour lie in the Quakers' organisational culture. This is shaped by the conviction that the community of believers represents the 'peaceable kingdom', and that this is upheld through a behavioural creed which emphasises restraint, verbal moderation and harmonious relationships. This then leads to a cultural pattern that encourages an aversion to, and avoidance of, anything which might disrupt harmony within the group. Robson observes that the result of this is that disputes which are left unresolved frequently re-emerge as conflicts between an individual's sense of personal identity and their identification with the community. She argues that if conflict can be viewed as a creative force, with members encouraged to share their individual stories, this could facilitate better conflict resolution and bring about a positive change in the organisational culture among Quakers.

Moving to the second main focus of the current research project, the use of facilitation and conflict resolution skills and processes within meetings, again we note that there is little similar research, but there is other research which is of related interest. Most of the publications on facilitation are in the form of guidance for facilitators or 'how-to' manuals, such as the classic by Roger Schwarz, and a number of these are explored in the literature review above.¹⁹⁵ Empirical research on facilitation is harder to find. Papamichail et al. have done research into decision

¹⁹³ Janet Holmes and Meredith Marra, 'Leadership and managing conflict in meetings', *Pragmatics*, 2010, 14.4, pp.439-462

¹⁹⁴ Susan M. Robson, 'An exploration of conflict handling among Quakers', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Huddersfield, 2005

¹⁹⁵ Schwarz, *The Skilled Facilitator*

workshops which reached the conclusion that the style and approach of the facilitator will have an impact on how a decision is reached and what action is decided on.¹⁹⁶ McFadzean has done work to identify some of the key competencies and skills needed for facilitators, based on the assumption that using a facilitator is one way of enhancing a group's effectiveness.¹⁹⁷ She points to earlier research which highlights two competency areas: first is the facilitator's awareness, their looking, listening and sensing of what is going on around them; second are the facilitator's communication skills, especially active listening, clarifying, questioning, summarising, observing and giving feedback. She also points to the importance of a facilitator being able to work with group dynamics, including conflict among group members. She then sets out a detailed set of competencies, and variations that are needed according to the type of group. One of the main implications of her proposals is the need for facilitators to be trained, evaluated and mentored. Again, McFadzean's research affirms the value of conducting the current project which explores the use made of some basic facilitation competencies.

One other research paper on facilitators is worth mentioning. Wang explored the role of student-facilitators in moderating online discussions.¹⁹⁸ Among other things he found that the ability to summarise discussions was perceived to be the top facilitation skill needed by facilitators. This affirms the value of focussing on this as one of the key skills that would be observed during this research project (see the observation schedule at Appendix 7).

Finally, in terms of research on facilitation, a number of researchers have conducted research into the facilitation of meetings that use the Group Support System (GSS), also known as the Group Decision Support System. GSS is an information system that aims to make group meetings more productive by offering electronic support for a variety of meeting activities. Anson et al. found that groups which had a facilitator experienced improved group processes and greater cohesion than groups which used the GSS without a facilitator; while groups that used both a facilitator and GSS support together tended to enhance their effective influence on

¹⁹⁶ K. N. Papamichail, G. Alves, S. French, J. B. Yang and R. Snowdon, 'Facilitation Practices in Decision Workshops', *The Journal of the Operational Research Society*, May 2007, **58**(5), pp.614-632

¹⁹⁷ Elspeth McFadzean, 'Developing and supporting creative problem solving teams: part 2 – facilitator competencies', *Management Decision*, 2002, **40**(6), pp.537-551

¹⁹⁸ Qiyun Wang, 'Student-facilitators' roles in moderating online discussions', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 2008, **39**(5), pp.859-874

cohesion and processes.¹⁹⁹ In earlier research, Bostrom et al. found that, where groups using GSS were facilitated, the quality of the group session was predominantly dependent on the facilitator and how they performed their role.²⁰⁰ Research with facilitators who used GSS found that a range of communication and group process skills were deemed most critical for facilitator success.²⁰¹ Subsequent research by one of the same researchers found that the level of a facilitator's experience, the extent to which this was external or within one's own organisation, and the use of GSS, all correlated with the extent and effectiveness of pre-meeting planning and engagement with agenda items.²⁰²

The research on facilitation affirms the value of a facilitator to a work group, such as a staff team, and illustrates the importance of how the facilitator carries out their role. This validates the worth of the current research project exploring how church staff team meetings are facilitated and led by the incumbent or other designated chair person.

4. Methods of Data Collection in the Field Research

In the case of this research project, the first stage of the pastoral cycle involved immersion in the experience of an aspect of pastoral practice, namely a staff team's meetings. The central approach to data collection in the field work was an ethnographic method taking a case study approach with two main methods: a form of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Both of these are well established methods used in studying local churches.²⁰³ (These two methods were supplemented by some limited exploration of the congregational setting and context, recognising that we cannot isolate the ministry staff team from its location within a particular congregation, set in a particular locality.) An ethnographic data collection method was chosen because the primary intention of the field research was to gather

¹⁹⁹ Robert Anson, Robert Bostrom, and Bayard Wynne, 'An experiment assessing group support system and facilitator effects on meeting outcomes', *Management Science*, 1995, **41**(2), pp.189-208

²⁰⁰ Robert P. Bostrom, Robert Anson and Vikki K. Clawson, 'Group facilitation and group support systems', *Group support systems: New perspectives*, 1993, pp.146-168

²⁰¹ Fred Niederman, Catherine M. Beise and Peggy M. Beranek, 'Issues and Concerns about Computer-Supported Meetings: The Facilitator's Perspective', *MIS Quarterly*, March 1996, **20**(1), pp.1-22

²⁰² Fred Niederman and Roger J. Volkema, 'The effects of facilitator characteristics on meeting preparation, set up, and implementation', *Small Group Research*, 1999, **30**(3), pp.330-360

²⁰³ Helen Cameron, Philip J. Richter, Douglas Davies and Frances Ward (eds), *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook* (London: SCM Press, 2005), pp.29-31

empirical data about an aspect of the practice of Christian ministry, namely how certain ministers and groups deal with their disagreements, in terms of the processes they use and the outcomes they reach, and what use they make of some standard tools and techniques for facilitating meetings and resolving conflicts. The approach taken was looking to generate empirical data which could then be reflected on through the later stages of the pastoral cycle.

The research questions set out in Chapter I point to information that is not easily quantifiable, such as: the processes by which certain people deal with their differences in the context of a group meeting; how far those processes can be accounted for by factors relating to personal communication style; and those people's theological understandings of their engagement with their differences. Such questions suggest the need for a flexible, qualitative approach, rather than a fixed, quantitative one.²⁰⁴

Given the types of research question being explored, it became clear that I had a primary interest in using what Carl Dudley calls a 'process frame'.²⁰⁵ For, as Dudley points out, using a process frame enables the researcher to 'see the ways in which a congregation plans and makes decisions ... fights and solves its problems'.²⁰⁶ What is true of a whole congregation is also true of a subgroup within the congregation, such as the staff team. This type of enquiry also lends itself to the use of case study and ethnographic method which require the researcher's physical participation in the group through presence over time.²⁰⁷ In addition, there was the need for directed conversations to explore the subjects' understanding and interpretation of what they do and believe. This led to the use of semi-structured interviews as the second main data-gathering method.²⁰⁸

Given that a qualitative rather than a quantitative data-gathering approach proved desirable, adoption of a case study method seemed likely to offer both a fruitful and a practical way forward. According to Robert Yin, a case study

²⁰⁴ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (London: Sage, 2003²) pp.18-23; and Robson, *Real World Research*, pp.86-93

²⁰⁵ Carl S. Dudley, 'Process: Dynamics of Congregational Life', in Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley and William McKinney, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp.105-129

²⁰⁶ Dudley, 'Process: Dynamics of Congregational Life', p.105

²⁰⁷ Frances Ward, 'The Messiness of Studying Congregations Using Ethnographic Methods' in Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting and Linda Woodhead (eds), *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp.125-137

²⁰⁸ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, pp.28-98

is: ‘a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence.’²⁰⁹ One of the primary benefits of a case study method is that it ‘allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events – such as ... small group behaviour,’ – hence its relevance to this project.²¹⁰ As Yin explains, a case study approach is likely to be useful when one is exploring ‘how’ type research questions. ‘This is because such questions deal with operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence.’²¹¹ A case study method therefore seemed suitable here, given that the primary research question of this project was ‘How do the incumbents and ministry staff teams of large churches deal with their disagreements, differences and tensions – i.e. with (low-level) conflict, as so defined – within their team meetings?’

Furthermore, any exploration of conflict in human interactions, even at the low level focused on here, needs to be able to deal with the inherently complex nature of the subject, and a qualitative approach is better able to capture some of that complexity than a quantitative one, being inherently more flexible.²¹² Conflict, even at low levels, tends to be somewhat ‘messy’, and it is therefore fitting to use what Frances Ward calls a flexible and ‘messy’ approach.²¹³ Ward is not suggesting however, that such an ethnographic approach lacks rigour or discipline; rather that it is seeking to bring some element of order and coherence to the mess.

One attraction of a qualitative research approach is that it lends itself to the use of inter-disciplinary lenses: sociology, organisational studies, leadership and management studies, research on personality type, conflict studies (itself an inter-disciplinary approach), family systems theory (a theory about human interactions), biography, fictional literature, theology (particularly of Christian ministry and ecclesiology), and theological reflection. This multi-disciplinary approach is also a feature of practical theology.²¹⁴ While in practice it was not possible to use all these

²⁰⁹ Quoted in Robson, *Real World Research*, p.178. See also Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009⁴)

²¹⁰ Yin, *Case Study Research*, p.4

²¹¹ Yin, *Case Study Research*, p.9

²¹² Hence Colin Robson’s naming of qualitative approaches as ‘flexible’ and quantitative as ‘fixed’. See Robson, *Real World Research*, pp.86-93

²¹³ See Ward, ‘Messiness of Studying Congregations’, pp.125-137

²¹⁴ Helen Cameron et al., *Studying Local Churches*, pp.17-18

lenses, a qualitative approach has allowed me to select from among them, and to change focus as the project has progressed and new elements have come to the fore.

Before deciding to adopt an exclusively qualitative research approach, consideration was given to a mixed-method research strategy, for example by combining the qualitative case studies with a quantitative questionnaire of the staff teams of all the corporate-sized Anglican churches in the Diocese of London.²¹⁵ The primary potential advantage of such a mixed method is that it could have provided some objective empirical data and a means of locating the case studies in a wider picture. This might have provided a basis for pointing towards more general applicability of the qualitative research. The limitations of time and resources meant that it was only realistic to take either a qualitative or a quantitative approach to this research project, rather than a combined approach. Given that I am not drawn to quantitative research temperamentally, given my limited experience with such research, and given the nature of the enquiry, the choice between the two approaches was a straightforward one. Nevertheless, hopefully the two case studies have provided data of sufficient interest that the project could be followed up by a quantitative research project carried out by someone with the necessary motivation.

In the role as researcher within this project, it is worth noting that I was a ‘practitioner–researcher’, that is someone who holds down a job and is involved in carrying out systematic enquiry relevant to that job.²¹⁶ Given this, a mixed method approach incorporating a quantitative questionnaire would have had a further practical disadvantage, in that I have little experience in using the method.²¹⁷ On the other hand, my most significant research project to date was a qualitative study using interviews as the primary method.²¹⁸ The approach used here therefore builds on some previous experience. Furthermore, it is in keeping with the approach to conflict consulting and intervention taken in my work over the last fifteen years, and regularly used during that time.²¹⁹ However, part of the challenge of this approach

²¹⁵ At least, inviting the staff teams of all such churches to participate.

²¹⁶ See Robson, *Real World Research*, pp.534-544

²¹⁷ I did use a mixed-method approach incorporating questionnaires in: Alastair J. M. McKay, ‘Evaluation of a Community Project: Muswell Hill Methodist Church’s Child Contact Centre’, essay submitted towards a DMin degree, Spurgeon’s College, London, July 2006

²¹⁸ Alastair J. M. McKay, ‘Interview Project: Community Mennonite Church’s Relationship with Its Pastors (1972-1998)’, essay submitted towards an MA in Conflict Transformation, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, 1998

²¹⁹ John Creswell indicates that personal experience is an important factor in deciding on a research approach. Creswell, *Research Design*, pp.22-23

is that ‘The researcher is required to hold both the position of *outsider* and that of *insider* within the particular setting’.²²⁰ So it is not without its challenges.

A key decision that needed to be made early on was whether to work with a single case study, as Hopewell, Guest and McClintock Fulkerson have all modelled in their in-depth congregational studies, or whether to try to use more than one case study for comparative purposes.²²¹ Obviously, it would not have been possible to undertake anything as ambitious as Penny Becker’s research involving twenty-three case studies, which was part of a full-time research project conducted over several years.²²² However, given the narrow focus of this project, it seemed that there would be value in using more than one case study, and being able to make some comparisons and contrasts between at least two cases. This would be one way to address the limitations of a ‘subunit level’ of focus (in this case, the staff team meeting) without researching the ‘larger unit of analysis’ (in this case, the congregation).²²³ Such an approach also follows Robert Yin’s ‘modest advice’ in relation to case study designs, which is that ‘Even if you can do a “two-case” case study, your chances of doing a good case study will be better than using a single-case design’.²²⁴ One of the advantages is that it strengthens any theoretical – and, by implication, any theological – conclusions reached.²²⁵

5. An Outline Description of the Two Church Staff Teams

The process of securing the participation of two staff teams for the case studies proved harder work and more challenging than foreseen. Prospective teams were introduced to the project using a short introductory document, set out in Appendix 3. The protracted process of identifying the case study teams is described fully in Appendix 4. Eventually I was able to identify three possible teams, and then selected the two most fitting ones that were most alike in size and composition, for

²²⁰ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, p.166

²²¹ See Hopewell, *Congregation*; Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture*; and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

²²² Penny E. Becker, *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

²²³ Yin, *Case Study Research*, p.52

²²⁴ Yin, *Case Study Research*, pp.60-61

²²⁵ Yin, *Case Study Research*, p.61

ease of comparison. This section offers an outline description of the two teams selected.

The larger of the two churches among the case studies was **St Peter's**, which is a large Evangelical Anglican church located in Greater London. It has a history of a strong preaching tradition. In terms of some Evangelical influences it may be worth noting that the clergy on staff received their theological training variously at St John's College in Nottingham, Ridley Hall in Cambridge and Trinity College in Bristol. The vicar was actively involved with the Evangelical Alliance, and one of the associate vicars had participated in the CPAS Arrow leadership programme. In addition, the church regularly ran Christianity Explored and Alpha courses each year, and also the CPAS Growing Leaders course. The vicar was keen that the church was not aligned to a particular national Evangelical conference, and various groups from the church went to Spring Harvest, the Keswick Convention, New Wine, and another smaller summer camp.

There were three church centres at St Peter's: the main centre which had a congregation of about 365 adults and thirty-five children, spread principally between two morning services and one in the evening; and two smaller centres, one with a congregation of about fifty adults and ten children, and the other with a congregation of about thirty adults and seven children.²²⁶ Thus overall the church comprised nearly 500 worshipping parishioners including over fifty children and youth, making it a solidly corporate-sized church.²²⁷ The core staff team of St Peter's comprised:

The vicar, Matthew, aged 54, who had been the incumbent of St Peter's for seven years.

An associate vicar, Gary, aged 35, who had been with the church for three years and who ministered both in the main congregation, and in the larger of the two small daughter congregations in the parish, Woodford Church.

An associate vicar, Harriet, aged 56, who had been with the church for one year and who ministered primarily with the smaller of the daughter congregations in the parish, Weston Church.

²²⁶ Figures provided by the church administrator, based on average attendance. The electoral roll comprised 441 adults.

²²⁷ Rothauge, *Sizing Up a Congregation*, pp.26-32

A curate, Judy, aged 37, who had been with the church for just over three years. She left midway through the observation process to take up a permanent appointment elsewhere, and so was only present for around half of the team meetings observed. (A new curate arrived after the observation process was completed.)

A senior administrator, Martha, aged 52, who had been on the staff of the church for two years, and had been a member of the church for over twenty-five years prior to that.

A lay pastoral worker, Mary, aged 65, who had been on the staff team for two years and a church member for over four years.

A lay youth worker, Joe, aged 24, who had been with the church for just two months when the observation process began.

A lay children and families worker, Paul, aged 24, who had been with the church for two years.

In addition, four other staff whom I had contact with were:

An administrator, Rachel, aged 51, who had just been with the staff for one month but part of the congregation for longer than this.

A secretary, Sarah, aged 39, who had been with the staff for over ten years, and part of the congregation for over twenty years.

An intern, Anna, aged 23, who had been with the staff for two months.

An intern, Cathy, aged 24, who had been with the staff for two months.

At several points there is mention of a neighbouring independent Evangelical church, which St Peter's regularly worked in partnership with, called **Greenacres Church**.

The smaller of the two churches among the case studies was **All Saints**, which is a large Evangelical Anglican church located in Greater London. In terms of some Evangelical influences it may be worth noting that the staff had received their theological training variously at Oak Hill College in London, at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford, at St Mellitus College in London and at London Bible College (as it then was). The vicar had also participated in the CPAS Arrow leadership programme. The church regularly ran Alpha courses during the year, and the CPAS Growing

Leaders course. The church was also an active participant in the New Wine summer camp and network, and the Soul Survivor camp for young people.

All Saints had one church centre with three rather distinct congregations: a morning congregation of around 200 adults and fifty children, an evening congregation of around seventy adults (with over half that number drawn from the church's social outreach project), and a youth congregation of around seventy teenagers, aged fourteen to nineteen.²²⁸ Thus overall the church comprised nearly 400 worshipping parishioners, including around 120 youth and children. This made All Saints a programme-sized church if only the adult parishioners were considered 'active members', as Rothauge seems to propose.²²⁹ However, All Saints constituted a corporate-sized church if the youth and children were counted as 'active members'. There was also a sister church in the same parish, with its own building. The core staff team of All Saints comprised:

The vicar, Patrick, aged 44, who had been the incumbent of All Saints for eighteen months.

A curate, Sue, aged 29, who had been with the church for just four months.

A minister in training, Tracy, aged 52, who had been a member of the church for nearly twenty-four years, was training as an ordained pioneer minister and had been on the staff team for two years.

A church administrator, Monty, aged 42, who had been on the staff of the church for six years.

A lay youth worker, Tristan, aged 28, who had been on the church staff for two years, but had been born and raised in the congregation, and who had occupied a number of part-time youth roles before coming onto the staff as the full-time youth worker.

A lay children's worker, Derek, aged 49, who had been with the church for nearly two years, and left soon after the observation process was concluded in order to work at another church.

A lay project worker, Diana, aged 58, who had been employed by a group of local churches during the previous four years, and who had joined the All Saints staff

²²⁸ Figures provided by the church administrator, based on average attendance.

²²⁹ Rothauge, *Sizing Up a Congregation*, pp.1 & 17-25

team a little over one year before the observation process began, when she became employed directly by the Parochial Church Council of All Saints.

In addition, there were three other people with whom I had some kind of contact at All Saints:

A churchwarden, Lynne, aged 50, who had been a churchwarden for about six months but had been a member of the church for about twenty-five years.

A caretaker, George, aged 46, who had been on the staff of All Saints for twenty-five years.

The associate vicar of St Andrew's (the sister church), Zoe, aged 54, who had been in her role for around one year.

6. Ethical Issues

The principal ethical issue foreseen at the outset of the project related to confidentiality, given the vulnerability for the staff team members of being exposed to scrutiny by being publicly reported on, and also given the nature of the information and cases that can sometimes be shared in such a context. So there were two different dimensions to the confidentiality issue.

The first aspect was whether or not to mask the identity of the two case study churches in the write-up of the research, or whether to reveal the true identities. Helen Cameron, an experienced researcher and practical theologian, advised that it is unrealistic to consider that one can effectively conceal the identities of case study churches in a published research project, and that word is bound to get out.²³⁰ At the outset, therefore, I sought agreement from the participants that the name of the church and its vicar would be made public, while seeking to maintain anonymity about the individual team members, by using pseudonyms. Mathew Guest provides a model in his work with the publicly identified St Michael-le-Belfrey.²³¹ Hence the consent form that was developed allowed for this information to be made public: see Appendix 5. This consent form was introduced near the outset of the first staff team meeting that I formally observed. After responding to

²³⁰ In private conversation at the Commonwealth Club, 20 April 2009.

²³¹ Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture*

some questions about the form, each person was invited to sign a copy, which everyone willingly complied with in both cases.

This consent form also sought to address the second aspect of confidentiality, which concerned the potentially sensitive and confidential information that can be shared in the context of a staff meeting. It therefore made clear a commitment to maintain confidentiality about such information, which would not be shared with anyone, including, for example, with my wife. It did however allow for two possible exceptions, with respect to information that might be discussed with my dissertation supervisor and my external work supervisor, a trained counsellor, who were each also bound by their own confidentiality constraints. This allowed for the possibility of being able to process something if it had a significant impact on me personally. In the event, there was no such eventuality, and there proved no need to discuss any confidential item with either of my supervisors.

However, as the analysis and coding of the data from the participant observations began, it became clear that much of what I might comment upon in the analysis could be seen as negatively critical of the two incumbents and their team members. I therefore decided that it would be best not to publicise the names of the two churches or the incumbents, and instead to try to preserve their anonymity by providing pseudonyms for the churches and for all the staff involved. As well as withholding some other details about how initial contact was made with the two teams, it is hoped that this will ensure that the necessary ‘reasonable precautions’ have been taken to maintain anonymity prior to publication in this dissertation.²³²

Part of the project involved interviewing some of the subjects to gather data for the research. Unlike the participant observation of staff meetings, the interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, and were fully transcribed. The participants’ informed consent was therefore secured, using a separate written form that was signed by each person at the beginning of the interview, set out at Appendix 6. As can be seen, this was developed after taking the decision to use pseudonyms, rather than real names, for the church and incumbent.

²³² Robson, *Real World Research*, p.502

7. Preparation for the Observation Process

From the literature on participant observation, it became clear that it would be important to develop a participant observation schedule to provide some parameters for the data that would be gathered and recorded from each observation.²³³ The schedule that was developed is set out in Appendix 7. The main issue to consider in developing the observation schedule was how to ensure that it would provide a system to yield the necessary data to address the first two research questions.

The first sheet of the schedule showed particulars of the staff meeting being observed, and then gave space for each agenda item as it arose, with boxes to indicate whether there was any expressed disagreement over that item. The bottom of the first sheet included some general process items, such as: whether the chair person established the meeting agenda at the outset; whether he or she solicited a range of views on each issue, especially from those who had not yet spoken; and whether he or she kept the discussion focussed on one issue, when another issue was drawn in. Whenever an agenda item arose on which there was some expressed disagreement, then the second sheet would come into use with a new sheet employed for each new item on which there was disagreement. Thus several copies of this sheet were available for each meeting. The sheet prompted the researcher to record examples of positive processes and tools for engaging with disagreement, and negative processes or approaches that would discourage constructive engagement with the disagreement or differences. So, for example, positive processes or tools that might be recorded included someone: welcoming differences of opinion being expressed; summarising or checking one's understanding of someone else's expressed view; and articulating or trying to surface the underlying concerns behind a stated position. Examples of negative processes that might be recorded included someone: discouraging disagreement being expressed; interrupting an expressed disagreement to prevent it developing or being explored; and negatively evaluating an idea prematurely, before there has been a chance to consider the idea. The sheet also gave the scope for recording the participants' main conflict approach (whether forcing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, or compromising), space for making observations and commentary (which could be continued on the back of the

²³³ Robson, *Real World Research*, pp.309-345

sheet), and finally for a note of the type of outcome of the disagreement (on which more below).

The third and final sheet of the observation schedule was a meeting room map, to show who was present and where they were seated. In practice this was completed near the beginning of each meeting. It proved valuable in helping to recall and reconstruct the meeting when writing up the journal entry.

As well as documenting the process that the incumbents and team members used, a record was needed of the outcomes to the disagreements observed. While developing the observation schedule, I recognised that it would be helpful to use a coding scheme to categorise these outcomes. (Coding schemes would more typically be associated with a ‘structured’ observation, rather than a ‘participant’ observation.)²³⁴ Robson’s advice is: ‘If there is an existing scheme which appears appropriate, consider using or adapting it.’²³⁵ Research led me to what seemed an ideal scheme that had been developed for some research in schools, published in a book on ethnographic research.²³⁶ As the authors made clear, this was a coding scheme that had been used in a number of studies, and that had been revised and modified in the light of research findings. So it had a proven track record as a scheme. As it appeared to have all the categories that might be needed, it was adopted in a slightly adapted form for the observations. This scheme was used for recording the outcome to disagreements on the observation schedule.

The observation schedule was refined with some minor modifications during the early stages of the observation process. Although they were retained, in practice the tick boxes for most of the positive facilitating actions identified were rarely used, as these were so rarely practised by either the incumbent or the meeting participants.

In September 2009 I purchased NVivo 8, a specialist computer software package for handling qualitative data, and began using this programme to facilitate the qualitative data analysis. So when the observation process began, a new digital journal entry was started for each observation (a ‘memo’ in NVivo), which

²³⁴ Robson, *Real World Research*, pp.325-339

²³⁵ Robson, *Real World Research*, p.332

²³⁶ Bonnie K. Nastasi and D. H. Clements, ‘Observational coding scheme for interactive social-cognitive behaviors’, unpublished manuscript, State University of New York at Albany, 1994, quoted in Jean J. Schensul, Margaret D. LeCompte, Bonnie K. Nastasi and Stephen P. Borgatti, *Enhanced Ethnographic Methods: Audiovisual Techniques, Focussed Group Interviews and Elicitation Techniques* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1999), pp.26-27

combined a write-up of the observation session along with researcher comments, questions and other musings. Additional journal entries were also created as the project progressed, particularly once I started coding the entries and was looking for patterns in the observation journals.²³⁷

As Robson notes, it takes time and effort to develop proficiency in such specialist computer programmes.²³⁸ I was fortunate therefore that a contact who was an experienced NVivo user was willing to provide a couple of half-day training sessions. It also helped to be guided by a published work on how to use the software.²³⁹ Overall, using NVivo proved an effective way to codify and categorise all the written data from the twenty-seven observation sessions and the six interviews, and the advantages have outweighed the disadvantages.²⁴⁰

8. The Journey of the Observation Process

In October 2009 I began the observation process with the first observation of the St Peter's staff team. Throughout the observation process I functioned primarily as a non-contributing participant observer, who was present throughout the meeting, but was non-speaking and therefore did not contribute to the content of the meeting. In a spectrum between 'complete participant' and 'observer-as-participant' this placed me close to the observer-as-participant end of the spectrum.²⁴¹ My status as researcher was known to the participants and I took no part in the activity of the main meeting. However, in the case of St Peter's I did participate in the social and prayer times prior to the business meeting. The fact that the social and prayer activities happened in different spaces to the business meeting helped to differentiate the nature of my participation. The possible impact of my presence as observer is commented on in the next section of this chapter.

For each observation, written notes were made during the meeting, using the observation schedule and the coding scheme for disagreement outcomes.

²³⁷ All are provided for the examiners on a computer disk, along with a deciphering code for the fictionalised names.

²³⁸ Robson, *Real World Research*, p.462

²³⁹ Graham R. Gibbs, *Qualitative Data Analysis: Explorations with NVivo* (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill, 2002)

²⁴⁰ As Robson also concludes: Robson, *Real World Research*, p.462. However, he does not mention the cost: at nearly £400 for NVivo 8, this was a significant disadvantage.

²⁴¹ Robson, *Real World Research*, pp.314-319

Beginning on the journey home on the underground train, I would then write up more extensive notes after the meeting on a laptop computer. These notes would subsequently provide the primary data resource for later analysis. In the case of the St Peter's staff meetings, which mostly happened on Monday mornings, it was often possible to finish writing up notes that same day. In contrast the All Saints meetings all happened on Thursday afternoons. Due to a regular home group commitment in my local church on Thursday evenings, it was rarely possible to finish writing up on the same day, and sometimes it would be three or four days later, or even two or three weeks later, before the writing-up could be finished.

The written notes from the observation were generally sufficient to enable me to recall the salient points of what had been observed, although occasionally I had difficulty deciphering my own notes. So there are a few minor gaps in the details and in one or two potentially significant exchanges, which meant that those elements could not be drawn on in the later analysis. This delay between the observation at All Saints and the writing-up was one of my biggest frustrations and challenges during the observation process.

A further challenge faced during the observation process was the extent of travel involved. The journeys to each of the churches involved a minimum of three hours' round trip by public transport, and sometimes as long as four hours. On arrival at the church there sometimes followed less than an hour's meeting observation, in the case of St Peter's. In addition my travel was significantly disrupted due to the weather and train failures and delays on the underground system: the winter of 2009-2010 was one of the coldest and worst on record, and included some significant snow falls.

Another challenge faced during the observation process was a major event in the life of the staff team at St Peter's. Over Christmas 2009, the vicar suffered a significant health incident. On 3 January 2010 I picked up an email from the senior administrator informing me of this incident, and telling me that the vicar was now at home and would not be at work for around a month. However, she reassured me that the rest of the team were 'continuing as normal' and that they would be meeting for their staff team meeting the following day. I experienced mixed reactions to this development. On the one hand, I was concerned that it could negatively affect the research project. On the other, I thought that it could be an interesting development, as it could allow observation of how the team functioned

differently without the vicar present. I thought this could be especially interesting given the vicar's dominant style. One clear disadvantage of the development was that the first meeting in January was the curate's last staff meeting, as she was leaving for a permanent post. In consequence, the staff team would be reduced to six people, and this would be fewer still if someone was missing for health or other reasons. However, as events worked out, I was only able to observe three team meetings in the New Year when the vicar was not present, so was not able to draw any major conclusions from his absence.

Another problematic element of this development was that when the vicar did return, in late February, the staff meeting time was shifted to 2.00 p.m. This was to accommodate the vicar's attendance at a medical clinic in the morning. This change gave me less time for writing up that day, and made it harder to complete the writing-up process on the day of observation, which was obviously the best way of ensuring as accurate a recollection as possible.

It is hard to know what the impact was of the gaps between observing meetings. It was not a problem in relation to the content of the meetings, given my primary focus on the process, and because the content was not so complex that it could not be picked up quickly. It is possible that the movement between my presence and absence meant that both teams were used to adjusting quickly to having me present as an observer and to continuing to function 'as normal'.

At Appendix 8 is the schedule of the observations undertaken with the two teams. The original hope had been to observe as many team meetings *consecutively* as possible, partly so that I could follow the threads between each meeting more easily, and partly to provide a constant observer presence and thus reduce the possibility of changed behaviour. As the schedule shows, the weeks before Christmas generally proved easier than the New Year, especially with the St Peter's team. Efforts to observe meetings at the beginning of 2010 were disrupted by my work commitments with Bridge Builders, and resulted in cancelling two of the planned observations with the St Peter's team. These work pressures also made it harder to write up observations as close to the meetings as desirable. At the end of the observation process there was a small backlog of meetings that needed to be written up all together, during the course of the Easter holidays.

9. Administration of the Style Instrument

As indicated in the section covering the research questions (see page 8 above), I had begun the project with the intention of exploring how far the way that the two case study staff teams dealt with their disagreements could be explained by the style profile of the incumbent and those of the other team members. *The Friendly Style Profile for Communication at Work* was chosen as the instrument to test this out.²⁴² A principal reason for this choice was my familiarity with the instrument: Bridge Builders had used it with over 900 people attending our week-long foundation courses over a period of fifteen years. In addition Bridge Builders had used the instrument with dozens of other individuals as an element in either pre-mediation or team-building work.

Agreement was sought at the outset of the project to the use of the style profile instrument, so that it would not be a surprise to the participants. However, a deliberate decision was made to wait until roughly halfway through the observation process before administering the style profile. This was to ensure that I had solidified my status as an observer, rather than as a contributor or educator, as I knew that the style instrument would require a presentation and explanation from me in order to make adequate sense to the members of both teams. At the same time, administration at a midway point would still give long enough for me to review my reading of the group members in the light of the style information.

The style profile questionnaires and booklets were therefore distributed at the beginning of January 2010, at the eighth meeting observed at St Peter's and at the fifth meeting observed at All Saints. Both teams were able to complete the questionnaires promptly. I presented an overview of the style instrument on 11 January for the St Peter's team, immediately following one of their standard team meetings. This was done without the vicar present, as he was recuperating at home following his health incident at Christmas. However, he was well enough for me to make a personal presentation to him, after the meeting with the rest of the team, so that he received the same information at the same time. A similar presentation was made to the All Saints team on 20 January, as part of their half-day planning day. (In addition, I had a further conversation with the vicar of All Saints about the style

²⁴² Gilmore and Fraleigh, *The Friendly Style Profile for Communication at Work*

profile results of his team members, at a later point.) These presentations also gave the team members the opportunity to ask questions about the instrument and how to interpret it.

Set out at Appendix 9 are the Friendly Style Profile scores for the staff team members of both teams, as well as my own scores as the researcher. Appendix 10 provides a brief overview of the four styles. Experience with Bridge Builders has shown that although many people dislike the questionnaire, nearly everyone accepts the results as presenting a fair picture of themselves. Very occasionally there is an exception, and the person is encouraged to redo the questionnaire to see if they come out with a different result. It therefore came as a surprise that two of the All Saints team questioned their particular results: the minister in training, Tracy, and the curate, Sue. In the case of the minister in training, she explained that she had completed the questionnaire the day after returning from a lengthy trip to Australia, and had not been in the best frame of mind when she did so. I encouraged her to redo the questionnaire, which she later did, and she was happier with the revised results. In the case of the curate, the results seemed to me a fair reflection of the person I had observed. I suggested that she also try redoing the questionnaire. However, she chose not to do so. Her case seemed to be one where she was more troubled by what the results said about her, more than whether they gave a fair reflection of her. This was a reaction we have occasionally seen in Bridge Builders' use of the style profile with clergy who attend our courses.

The main disappointment for me with the use of the style profile is that the volume of other data produced relating to the two primary research questions resulted in there being insufficient space or time within the scope of this DMin dissertation to write up an adequate reflection on the research question about how far the way that the staff teams dealt with their disagreements could be explained by the style profile of the incumbent and other team members. It became clear that this would require a separate article, which hopefully I will have the opportunity to write at some time in the future.

10. Impact of the Researcher's Presence as Observer

It would be naïve to pretend that my presence as an observer had no impact on the meetings attended. Even in the 'observer-as-participant' role, one has a role within

the group as the researcher, and this changes the group in subtle ways.²⁴³ The other members of the group could observe me taking notes at certain points during the course of the meeting, and noticing when this happened could have affected their responses and behaviours to what was going on. This links to the major disadvantage of observation as a research method, which is ‘the extent to which an observer affects the situation under observation’.²⁴⁴ My principal strategy to overcome this was to undertake sufficient observations closely together that the participants would become so accustomed to the observer’s presence that they would carry on as if he was not there.

There were four different instances in my observation of the St Peter’s team when one of the team members said or did something which showed a conscious awareness of my presence as an observer, during the course of their formal team meetings. On each occasion the speaker was a different member of the team: the youth worker, the senior administrator, the vicar, and the male associate vicar. In addition, outside the meetings, the vicar of St Peter’s also made a couple of comments to me, which suggested some small level of unease about the observation process. There were no such instances during my observations of the All Saints team. One reason for this may have been that I was present for the social and prayer sections of the St Peter’s team gatherings, whereas these did not form part of the All Saints gatherings, and so the All Saints team had much less informal interaction with me, and largely only experienced me as a silent observer of their meetings.

During the interviews, a question was asked about the impact on the staff meetings of my presence as observer, and how the interviewees had experienced this. The vicar of St Peter’s was confident that my presence had not affected the dynamics in their meetings:

It didn’t make any difference [having you present], it wasn’t an issue. I think having you around for the coffee on a Monday morning was an asset, and having you come up to lunch, I mean those bits and pieces around were helpful, because you became a human being, and that was no bad thing. And it also meant that because we got to know you we could trust you, and was not just the formal signed bit of paper to prove that ‘I’m going to behave myself’, but actually the relational, we know who Alastair is. But no, having you in the meeting wasn’t an issue at all.

²⁴³ Robson, *Real World Research*, pp.314-319

²⁴⁴ Robson, *Real World Research*, p.311

This was confirmed by both the other interviews from St Peter's. The female associate minister responded: 'I think I would spend time thinking "I wonder what you're thinking." <laughter> But I don't think I behaved any differently from if you hadn't been in the room, that actually made no difference.' And the senior administrator replied that 'I don't think it made any difference to the staff team meetings, apart from the odd jibe coming your way, but certainly there was no behavioural difference at all. So I think what you saw, is the way we are.' This acknowledges that people were aware of my presence, but asserts that they did not behave differently than if I had not been present, which was my own impression.

Similar reassurances were offered by two of the team at All Saints. The administrator commented:

Once we got going I don't think [your presence as observer] had much input [*probably meaning*: impact] at all actually, I wasn't conscious that we were modifying the way we behaved, or what we were talking about when you were in the room compared to the meetings when you weren't in the room, I don't think there is any input [*again*] on that. I mean I think one of the interesting dynamics was in having you there as a complete observer, because I think a number of us would've loved to have known what you were thinking.

The vicar of All Saints offered a similar view. However, the minister in training at All Saints provided a different, minority voice:

I think it was fine you being here. I remember once observing when you weren't here that we behaved differently than when you were here ... I think people were freer, and [the curate] agreed with me, but [the vicar] said he thought we behaved in exactly the same way. So I noticed there was a difference, it wasn't because of your being constraining ... however much we could pretend it doesn't make any difference, obviously it does make a difference. And subconsciously we were behaving in different ways inevitably. I'm sure it's like when you have a friend to stay in the house, you might have a blazing row with your spouse that day, so ... I think it's inevitable.

This suggests that my presence did exercise some kind of moderating influence on at least two members of the All Saints team. And just because others did not think this the case, does not mean that at some subconscious level – as the minister in training observed – the same may not have been true for them also. However, on balance, I think it is safe to say that my presence did not make any dramatic difference to the dynamics and interactions of the two team meetings, and that any impact was mild and subtle.

Finally it may be worth noting that towards the end of the observation process, when no significantly new data seemed to be emerging, I made a slight shift in my role with one of the case study teams, at All Saints, to enable me to offer a small number of process observations during the course of the meetings. This slight shift did not add significantly to the gathered research data, but neither did it affect the earlier substantive data gathered, which was the primary source of the data analysis. So my conclusion was that it was largely neutral in terms of the research project. A fuller report and evaluation of this shift is included at Appendix 11.

11. Interview of Selected Team Members

After completion of the observation process set out above, along with finishing the writing-up of this over the Easter holidays, I began preparing for the second stage of the data-gathering, which was to be the semi-structured interviews. However, progress was difficult to make during May and June 2010, as this is the busiest time of year for Bridge Builders, when we run a number of intensive longer courses. I was therefore unable to take any study days during those two months, until the very end of June. At that point an interview schedule was finalised, set out at Appendix 12, as well as a consent form, at Appendix 6. Then I was able to test out the consent form and the interview questions through conducting a trial interview with the associate vicar at St James's, Muswell Hill. This proved reassuring, as all but one of the questions proved clear and elicited the type of response being sought. It also confirmed that the interview would probably last about an hour. In the light of the associate vicar's feedback, one question was refined which had caused some confusion. Arrangements were then made to conduct interviews with three members each from the St Peter's and the All Saints teams. As interviewees, I chose the two incumbents, one of the associate vicars from St Peter's and the minister in training from All Saints, and both of the administrators. This gave me three men and three women, and four clergy and two lay people. All six interviews were conducted on two successive days, at All Saints on 19 July and at St Peter's on 20 July. The schedule of interviews is attached at Appendix 13.

I arrived early in the morning at All Saints, which enabled me to join three of the staff (the vicar, the curate and the administrator) who were present for morning prayer. The first interview was with the vicar, and this went more

smoothly and straightforwardly than I had anticipated it might, and lasted about an hour. The only hiccup was when I asked for some illustrations, and the vicar struggled to identify these until he fished out an agenda from a past team meeting, and was then able to proceed. This request also proved a challenge for the administrator and the minister in training. At the end of the three interviews, I was struck by how different some of the responses were, and how important it was to have done at least three interviews. I was particularly struck by how different the responses were from the female minister in training from those of her two male colleagues. In retrospect, perhaps four interviews, with two people of each gender, might have been better (for example, in the case of this team, interviewing the curate as well).

The interviews at St Peter's the following day were a somewhat different experience. I arrived 25 minutes early, and bumped into the vicar who immediately confronted me with the news that he had a funeral at 11.00 a.m. that morning, and said that we would have to finish the interview by 10.30 a.m., some half an hour earlier than previously arranged. We therefore got going immediately. I gave the vicar the informed consent form, which he started reading immediately, so I decided not to read through it aloud, to save time. However, this left me feeling that there was something missing in paving the way for the interview, in terms of establishing my presence as a human being. However, once we got going with the interview, we both settled into the process. Although I would have preferred to have been more relaxed and less conscious of the time pressure, I was struck that there seemed a parallel with the experience of the St Peter's staff meetings which often seemed to be rushed, with a drive to finish early. This interview lasted less than three quarters of an hour, so we were able to conclude just before the 10.30 a.m. deadline that the vicar had set. However, I was left wondering whether the vicar might have been more forthcoming if the same time pressure had not been at play.

The second interview at St Peter's was with the female associate vicar. It was the strangest of all the six interviews, because the associate vicar seemed to keep answering different questions from the ones that I asked, or at least rarely gave a direct response to the particular question, but seemed to approach the question somewhat sideways. This also proved to be the longest interview, at 72 minutes, and was in marked contrast to the final interview, with the senior administrator, which was the shortest at just over 30 minutes. In part this reflected the different

styles of the two women, with one tending to be somewhat wordy and ruminative, while the other tended to be succinct and not one to dwell on things so much. As at the end of the All Saints' interviews, on my journey home from St Peter's I found myself wondering whether I should have conducted a fourth interview, for example with the youth worker.

In my original research proposal, I had proposed that I would conduct two individual interviews and one large group interview with the whole staff team of both churches. However, by the end of July I had concluded that carrying out a group interview would be unrealistic. Research indicated that a group interview was substantially different from an individual interview, and would require a separate interview schedule, and at least one practice group interview.²⁴⁵ I was also concerned that I was reaching the limits of the amount of data that could be handled. I therefore reached the decision not to try to conduct a group interview, especially as this would have had to have been delayed until the autumn of 2010. In light of this decision, and my earlier wonderings, I therefore regretted not having arranged a fourth interview in each team, with the curate of All Saints and the St Peter's youth worker. These would also have given me a perspective of two people in their twenties, and of a younger generation than the other six who were interviewed. This remains one of my regrets about the project.

Given the length of the interviews, and my previous experience of transcribing interviews, I employed a professional transcriber to transcribe the six interviews.²⁴⁶ (This involved a contract which included a commitment to strict confidentiality by the transcriber.) Although this is not recommended, as the transcription process enables one to build up familiarity with the interview material, it was the most realistic option for me, given my time limitations, and was a decision I never regretted. Instead, I went through the transcriptions, listening to the recordings, to pick up the few errors or mis-hearings by the transcriber.

²⁴⁵ See Robson, *Real World Research*, pp.283-289 and Lia Litosseliti, *Using Focus Groups in Research* (London: Continuum, 2003)

²⁴⁶ The full transcriptions are included on a separate compact disc for the examiners, but do not form part of the dissertation, in order to maintain the confidentiality agreement with the interviewees.

IV. Field Research Findings and Data Analysis

1. Introduction

This chapter sets out the main findings from the field research and an analysis and assessment of the data gathered. It begins with a note of acknowledgement and affirmation of the two incumbents and their staff teams who participated in the research. Sections three, four and five provide a description of the context: first explaining the purpose of the staff team meeting and its relationship to wider church structures; then explaining the pattern of the staff meetings in the two case studies; before going on to explain how the meeting agendas were formed in both cases.

The following substantive sections look to address the first two research questions, on how incumbents and ministry staff teams dealt with their disagreements, and what use they made of tools and techniques for facilitating meetings and resolving conflict, within their team meetings. Section six sets out how disagreements were settled in both teams, in terms of outcomes. Section seven explores a pattern of conflict avoidance and discouragement of disagreement observed particularly in one of the teams. Section eight looks at the generic issue of distinguishing between content and process, and gaining clarity over process. Section nine considers the discipline of focussing on one item at a time, while section ten looks at the technique of addressing underlying concerns beyond initial positions, as a basic tool for resolving conflict. The last two substantive sections, eleven and twelve, look at the tool of summarising discussions or conclusions, and at the technique of testing for agreement or consensus when moving to a conclusion or decision. Finally there is a concluding section which draws some threads together.

In terms of the pastoral cycle, this chapter covers the first two stages: immersion in the experience of an aspect of pastoral practice, namely a staff team's meetings, through extended direct observation; and analysis of that observation and experience. In doing so, it will seek to distinguish clearly between what was observed and the commentary on and analysis of what was observed. In the interests of a meaningful flow, the commentary and analysis will follow on immediately from the description of what was observed. However, there will be a clear line drawn in the text between what was observed, and the researcher's commentary.

2. An Important Note about the Research Findings and the Two Staff Teams

It is a brave step for any group to open itself up for external scrutiny and examination. This became clear during the attempts to find two staff teams willing to participate in this research project. It was evident both from the number of refusals, and from the fears and concerns that were expressed by the three staff teams that I eventually met with. As explained above, although I secured their consent to identify the name of the church and the vicar, I later concluded that it would be more appropriate to disguise these. My main way of trying to preserve anonymity is by providing pseudonyms for the churches, vicars and other team members, and by making the job titles generic. I hope that this, and withholding some other details, will ensure that the necessary ‘reasonable precautions’ have been taken to help ensure anonymity prior to publication in this dissertation.²⁴⁷

At the outset of this chapter I want to stress a few things. I developed a positive relationship with both staff teams during the course of the research project, particularly with the St Peter’s team whose social and prayer time I participated in prior to their formal staff meetings, and who invited me to join them for their staff Christmas party which followed one of their team meetings. In both cases I grew to love and respect the two incumbents and the rest of the team members. It was therefore difficult to find myself focusing much of my analysis on a negatively critical reading of what I had observed. The reason for this was because the unhelpful approaches that were taken and the actions that were omitted serve to highlight the principal useful lessons that I considered could be drawn from the research project. However, I recognise that, for those concerned, such criticism may feel like an unkind return for the hospitality offered and the (albeit temporary) friendships established. Nevertheless, both teams discussed and were aware of the costs and risks of participating in the project.

I also confess that all of the failings identified here are ones that I have been guilty of myself at one time or another in my roles both as chair and participant in staff team meetings over the years. I would be very surprised if most leaders could not confess the same; the shortcomings explored here are all common ones.

²⁴⁷ Robson, *Real World Research*, p.502

So I would not want the incumbents and team members of the two case study churches to be discouraged, but rather to see that, like the rest of us, they have scope to continue to grow and develop. My hope is that what might be learnt from the project will be a valuable gift to others, as well as hopefully to the two teams concerned.

At the outset of the research project one of the set parameters was that I was ‘seeking staff teams that are functioning reasonably well, and are not currently facing serious struggles or crisis’.²⁴⁸ Both of the case study teams met this criterion, and there was nothing that emerged during the research process to suggest otherwise. In this sense, I experienced both teams as ‘normal’ and relatively healthy groups. Both are teams that I would have been happy to be a member of, made up of individuals whom I would have been glad to have had as colleagues.

At the beginning of this chapter it is therefore worth emphasising a few of the most positive and healthy aspects of the two teams. There was a strong sense from both teams that they cared deeply for the churches that they were serving, and also that they cared for one another as team members. There was also evidence that they worked at building their relationships with one another, as well as addressing the tasks and content issues that they faced. As part of this, it was clear that both teams had the capacity to have fun and to laugh together, which can be a key indicator of health in a group. In the case of the St Peter’s team, it was also noteworthy how they pulled together as a team following the crisis in the vicar’s health (about halfway through the observation process) which led to the vicar being out of the office for several weeks.

3. The Purpose of the Staff Team Meeting, and the Meeting’s Relationship to Wider Church Structures

Within the Church of England, at a local parish church level, it is worth noting that government is the shared responsibility of the incumbent (typically a vicar) and the Parochial Church Council (PCC), or sometimes a District Church Council (DCC).²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Alastair J. M. McKay, ‘Case Study of Two Church Staff Teams: A Research Project with Larger Evangelical Churches in the Diocese of London’, p.3. See Appendix 2.

²⁴⁹ Martin Davie, *A Guide to the Church of England* (London: Mowbray, 2008), pp.13, 47, 48. Where there are multiple buildings, a DCC will cover responsibility for one church building and part of the parish, where the PCC covers all the different church buildings and the whole parish.

There is no formal legal role for a staff team in the government of the parish. However, in practice in a corporate- or programme-sized church the staff team may be more influential than the PCC (or DCC) in terms of the day-to-day life of the parish, and may also be the primary source of ideas and initiatives. The PCC (or DCC) may largely play a role of setting general direction, or of approving what has been decided – or at least proposed – by the staff team. This is illustrated by a comment from the administrator at All Saints who said during interview:

I mean you go back three or four years to when the previous vicar was here: DCC meetings would consist of him coming to DCCs and telling the DCC what he and the staff had decided to do.

While the relationship between the staff team and the PCC (or DCC) is potentially an interesting one to explore, and would be worth researching, it was not something considered within the constraints of this research project. (English church consultant, John Truscott, provides a helpful starting point for reflecting on some of the issues, and one possible model for how to resolve the potential conflict in roles.²⁵⁰ Andrew Dawswell raises similar issues in relation to ‘ministry leadership teams’.²⁵¹) Given the lack of legal role for the staff team, it is helpful to clarify what the purpose of the staff team meeting is, as the team meeting is a central focus of this research project. During the interviews, an early question explored this issue.

At St Peter’s, the vicar’s understanding of the purpose of the weekly staff team meeting was ‘to deal with the immediate’ by checking what people were doing in the week ahead and planning for any events in the coming week. The senior administrator was clear that it was also to cover ‘issues or reports or updates from the members of staff’, and that occasionally ‘we may have agenda items as well, but I will email those out in advance, so folk know if we’ve got agenda items, but they’re not that major, they’re topics for discussion’. One of the associate vicars framed the purpose slightly differently, stating it as being: ‘To reflect on what’s going on in the parish, and to hear from different members on the team. To review the Sunday services, to plan for future services, and other events taking place.’ Her sense of the meeting being a place ‘to reflect on’ what was going on in the parish did not seem to be overtly shared by the vicar or administrator. However, overall there was a fairly common understanding of the purpose of the staff meeting at St Peter’s.

²⁵⁰ John Truscott, ‘Should the staff lead the church?’

²⁵¹ Dawswell, *Ministry Leadership Teams*, pp.19-21

In contrast, at All Saints it was clear that the purpose of the weekly staff meeting was not a settled matter during my period of observation. This was highlighted by the very first staff meeting observed at All Saints, where the purpose of the staff team meeting was one of the main items discussed on the agenda. It was under discussion because of a structural change at All Saints, where they were pioneering a different structure – which the curate suggested was not being tried by any other Anglican church they knew of – with the formation of ‘congregational leadership teams’.²⁵² These were small groups which incorporated some of the staff team along with representatives from the relevant ‘congregation’, that is the group of people who gathered for worship at the three different services: the morning service, the evening service and the youth service. The congregational leadership teams were specifically responsible for overseeing the worship of these three different congregations. These teams had been established at the initiative of the current vicar as a way to try to ensure better congregational input into what happened in worship, and in order to move away from the pattern, established under his predecessor, where the staff team essentially decided what happened in worship. However, it was clear throughout my period of observing the All Saints staff team that this organisational change had the result of bringing into question the purpose of the staff team and thereby its team meetings. One of the effects of the change was that the staff team was more constrained in its ability to make certain decisions, as these had to be referred to the relevant congregational leadership team if the issue involved one of the services.

When the interviews were conducted, three months after the end of the observation process, the vicar of All Saints described the staff meetings as having:

A number of purposes; one is to improve communication between the members of the team ... There are certain things also which we need to decide together as a team, which affect not just the thing that we do, but the broader team. And it also enables us to call for help ... for the things that we individually are responsible for ... So it's coming together to discuss and to make decisions and to inform [one another], that help us to work together as a team and to move the mission ahead.

In responding to the question about the purpose of the staff meeting, the church administrator drew the contrast with how it had been under the previous vicar:

²⁵² In fact this was not a novel idea in the Church of England. Robert Warren developed a similar approach at St Thomas' Crookes in Sheffield during the 1980s. See Robert Warren, *On the Anvil* (Crowborough: Highland Books, 1990), pp.34-35

I think that the purpose is less clear now than it was under the previous incumbent, who tended to run the church through the staff team, and so in those days it was more the *de facto* leadership team of the church. I think now its purpose really is to provide a gathering point for those people who have a peculiar privilege of being employed by the church ... as a point of coordination and communication, as opposed to really being involved in any kind of leadership decision-making, although we do do a bit of that.

This understanding was shared by the minister in training. She offered one additional aspect that she valued which was ‘dealing with important pastoral issues that we need to share with each other’, and she also considered that because of their weekly nature, staff meetings ‘do cover strategic issues, because the DCC only meets once a month’. She also indicated that although they still reviewed Sunday services in staff meetings, ‘that’s become less important since there have been congregational leadership teams’.

The purpose of the staff meetings at All Saints was revisited again towards the end of my observation of the team, when the vicar emailed the whole team, following a brief conversation with me, and also following discussions with the church administrator about how to improve the working of the staff team. In that email, of 8 February 2010, he suggested that there were three main purposes of the staff team meeting, which he described as:

1. A place for support and encouragement where we can off-load some of our difficulties and receive help, advice and practical support.
2. An opportunity to have excellent communication and the transfer of information across departments [i.e. different areas of ministry or functioning within the life of the church].
3. A place to discuss and try out new ideas, either for decision where appropriate or for input prior to presenting at another group or meeting.²⁵³

Discussion of the purpose of the staff meeting was not finished until after my observation of team meetings had ended, but it did seem to have become more settled by the time my interviews were conducted, three months later.

It seems appropriate to compare the purposes articulated in these two case studies with something of an ideal set out by Rendle and Beaumont in one of the few published texts which specifically cover staff team meetings in large churches, albeit in a US context. Rendle and Beaumont assert that ‘the [weekly]

²⁵³ Email from the vicar to the staff team, dated 8 February 2010, and copied to the researcher

staff meeting is one of the most important disciplines a staff team can practice'.²⁵⁴

They justify this by explaining that:

The staff meeting is a primary place to provide a centre that offers both a clearinghouse for information and a point of alignment for the efforts of all staff members. It is the place to have conversations about vision, mission, purpose, and how the pieces fit together.²⁵⁵

They go on to identify what they consider should be the six typical purposes of the staff meetings of large congregations: missional alignment, development of community, information sharing, supervision of group work, role renegotiation, and development of staff and congregational culture. Each of these is worth a little expansion.

On missional alignment, the staff meeting 'provides the platform for [the] visioning work of the senior clergy because it is one of the few times when staff are all gathered together'.²⁵⁶ Rendle and Beaumont see it as the task of the senior clergy to remember and rehearse the congregation's vision so that other staff members can work out how their own part contributes to the mission of the whole. They see this aspect as a central purpose of the staff meeting.

On development of community, Rendle and Beaumont highlight the need to remind church staff that they are part of a wider community, because they are so often working alone rather than directly with their colleagues.²⁵⁷ This points to the value of a regular time together as a staff, and the importance of the social dimension of such gatherings.²⁵⁸ The vicar at St Peter's was certainly aware of the importance of the social dimension of the staff team, as revealed in this comment during my interview with him:

But that's an unresolved tension ... that crops up in all sorts of team meetings where folk say, 'I've got something else, and actually sitting drinking coffee [*implied*: isn't a priority] ... it's much more strategic that I go and meet this person.' Yes, at one level it may well be. But actually the drinking coffee together is the glue that enables us to operate.

The St Peter's team also made this a priority by holding both a social and a prayer time prior to gathering for their business meeting.

²⁵⁴ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.188

²⁵⁵ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.188

²⁵⁶ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.190

²⁵⁷ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.191

²⁵⁸ This point is also made by Westing: Westing, *Church Staff Handbook*, p.137

On information sharing, Rendle and Beaumont explain that this needs to be done selectively, not giving too much information but working with the principle of ‘no surprises’ so that no one is surprised about significant things that are being done in the life of the church, and so that all staff know how plans will affect their own work and responsibilities. The authors also stress that sharing information ‘is not an invitation for others to review the work, raise questions about how a staff person is shaping the work, or suggest improvements – unless asked’.²⁵⁹ This points to the need for the chair person to intervene when other staff stray down one of these avenues. This was a problem that arose several times during the All Saints’ staff meetings.

On supervision of group work, Rendle and Beaumont mean occasional discussions of ‘formative evaluation’, that explore questions about what the staff team is learning about their work and mission, where they need to build new or better relationships, and what they need to prioritise in different time periods.²⁶⁰ On role negotiation, they refer to exploration of where work between staff needs to be collaborative rather than compartmentalised, and of staff members’ needs in relation to work patterns – such as what emails different people want to be copied to them.²⁶¹

Lastly, on developing staff and congregational culture, Rendle and Beaumont point to the central role of the staff team in shaping the congregational culture, and see the staff meeting as ‘a place, a platform, where norms can be tested and changed as senior clergy work with their staff’.²⁶² It was striking that both the administrator and the minister in training at All Saints were aware of the impact of the staff team on the culture of the church. (The vicar did not volunteer a specific comment on this.) In response to one of my interview questions about what they thought God might want for them as a staff team when it comes to dealing with disagreement and low-level conflict within the team meetings, the administrator responded:

I think also as staff team there’s a responsibility on us to model the way we deal with [conflict] to other members of the church, and also to each other, so that when we’re dealing with our own particular teams and conflicts within the teams, that we’re able to put into practice what we’ve learnt and modelled amongst ourselves.

²⁵⁹ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.192

²⁶⁰ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.193

²⁶¹ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.194

²⁶² Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.195

In response to the same question, the minister in training remarked:

So I think God would like us to be united, and honest without being destructive, and affirming and encouraging, and not in any way combative or competitive. And I think he would like us to be more available and vulnerable to each other, and more trusting of each other, because I think if we as a staff team can't do that, then what hope there is for the rest of the church, I don't know.

So although the role of the staff team in shaping congregational culture was not an explicit purpose at All Saints, there did appear to be a consciousness of this in a way that was not articulated by any of the interviewees from St Peter's.

Overall it was clear that while there was some awareness of the issues and purposes articulated so clearly by Rendle and Beaumont, there was scope for more thought and clarity about the purposes of the staff team meetings at both St Peter's and All Saints.

4. The Pattern of Staff Meetings of the Two Case Study Teams

The **St Peter's** staff team normally met on a Monday, and their typical pattern was to start by meeting at 10.00 a.m. in the church-run café immediately next door to the church building, for some time socialising with one another. This included all of the eight core staff team, although it was not unusual for the head administrator to be missing or only arrive towards the end of the time. Then at 10.30 a.m. the group moved to a meeting room in the church building, and were joined by the administrator Rachel, and the two interns, Anna and Cathy, for a time of prayer together. This prayer time was led by different members of the team in rotation, and typically involved a short biblical reflection of some kind, and then prayer for personal needs, often in two smaller groups, and often divided on the basis of gender. At the conclusion of this prayer time, I found that in practice (although not formally) there was normally about a ten-minute interval, which was used by some to get a hot drink. (Typically, until her departure, the curate Judy made drinks for those – including me when I was visiting – who wanted one.) The core staff team, initially along with the administrator Rachel, then gathered in the vicar's large office around a large oval table seated at comfortable modern office chairs, with the vicar sitting at the head of the table.

The vicar, Matthew, chaired the meeting if he was there; or, if not, then the senior of the two associate vicars, Gary, did so. There was no formal agenda. However, there was a regular pattern which functioned as an implicit agenda for the meeting. This began with the core staff members completing an A5 sheet of paper with a grid for the week, in order to show what meetings or commitments they had coming up over the following seven days. Then there was a round robin with each person reporting briefly what they were doing in the coming week. Then Rachel, one of the administrators, ran through what was in the church diary for the week, in terms of the use of the church building, concluding with the services on Sunday, and noting who was leading and preaching at these. Rachel then left, and the chair person (usually the vicar) went around the group one by one asking if they had any agenda to share and, if so, the item was then immediately discussed. On some occasions, before doing the round robin, the vicar would flag up one or more items he considered important and that he wanted to be discussed, and these were considered first. On other occasions – and more typically – he would wait until the end of the round, and then mention any items he wanted to raise.

As I understood it, the business meeting was scheduled to run for about an hour and a half, the meeting having usually begun around 11.10 a.m., although 11.00 a.m. was the notional start time. The target ending point was unclear. During the observation process I understood either 12.45 p.m. or 1.00 p.m. to be the target end for the meeting. In my interview with the vicar, he gave the ending point as between 12.30 p.m. and 1.00 p.m. The female associate vicar who was interviewed thought the meeting was scheduled until 12.30 p.m. The senior administrator understood the meeting to be scheduled to finish at 12.45 p.m., or earlier ‘if agenda items allow’. In practice, it was rare for the meeting to run on even as late as 12.45 p.m. During my observations it usually finished between 12.15 p.m. and 12.35 p.m., but could finish as early as 12.00 p.m., with the meeting therefore lasting less than an hour.

As already noted, the team experienced a major disruption about halfway through the observation process, as the vicar, Matthew, suffered a health incident during the Christmas period. When the team returned in the New Year, they met for about six weeks without him, and then, when he returned in late February, the meeting time was shifted to 2.00 p.m., in order to accommodate Matthew’s attendance at a medical clinic in the morning. One of the consequences of this was

that the social gathering time no longer happened, and the prayer time was held without the vicar, immediately prior to the business meeting, at 1.30 p.m. The meeting generally did not last more than an hour when it was held in the afternoon.

The team business meetings did not usually either begin or end with prayer, although there were occasional exceptions, for example when the curate, Judy, chaired one of the meetings before her departure, and she invited a team member to pray as a way to close the meeting.

Although there was no written agenda for these staff meetings, there were written notes prepared and distributed by Martha, the head administrator, after each meeting. These included a brief summary note of the items discussed at the meeting, along with a detailed list of outstanding action items. There were five columns for each action item with: a numbering scheme (rather strange and not easy to make sense of); a description of the nature of the action required; the initials of the person(s) due to take the action; a date when the action was due by; and a column to note when the action was completed. However, this detailed list of outstanding action points was never reviewed within the staff meeting itself, during my period of observation.

In addition to the St Peter's staff gatherings on Mondays, there was a morning prayer meeting from Tuesday to Friday, 9.00 to 9.30 a.m., which was predominantly attended by staff members, but was open to others to attend if they wished. Once a term (i.e. three times a year), there was a staff team planning day, from 9.00 a.m. to 3.30 p.m., held off-site, one of which I attended in March 2010. Also once a term they would have a staff social, which encompassed the wider staff team, normally held at the vicarage, always with food. I attended the staff social held just before Christmas in 2009, and participated in the gift exchange that was part of this particular gathering. Once a year there would be a staff quiet day, held off-site and externally led, and also a staff day out: both of these days included the wider staff team, not just the senior staff.

The **All Saints** staff team meeting was held on Thursday afternoons during the period of my observation. When the observation process began in mid-November, the target starting time for the meeting was 1.30 p.m. (which had been their pattern for a while), but this moved to 2.00 p.m. from the second meeting that I observed. However, in practice it was not unusual for the meeting to begin five or ten minutes late and sometimes later still. The planned ending point was 4.00 p.m.,

but again in practice this proved very variable: 4.00 p.m. was generally the earliest that the meeting ended, and it was not at all unusual for the meeting to go on beyond this point, even as late as 4.20 p.m.

The meeting was held in a room within the church building which was normally designated for prayer, which contained a variety of lounge chairs and sofas. Unlike St Peter's, there was neither social time nor any time of sharing and prayer, as part of or prelude to the meeting. Instead, there was normally (but not always) a brief prayer by the vicar or chair person, and then straight into the agenda of the meeting. Unlike St Peter's, All Saints used a standard agenda, set out at Appendix 14, with sixteen standard items, of which four were blank for items generated within the meeting (although more than four items might be raised). However, although the first few items of the agenda were generally followed (up to item 6, the review of Sunday services), thereafter the agenda was in practice more fluid, and the last two items (highlighting things to communicate to others, and a review of the meeting including whether it had fulfilled its purpose) were never reached in the meetings that I observed.

The vicar of All Saints explained to me, after the second meeting observed, that as well as having changed the start time by half an hour, they had changed the structure of their meetings, and that what he had planned was for the first hour or so to be review, and then for there to be half an hour or so for focusing on a specific area of ministry. However, this was not consistently the case in the meetings I observed, and when there was a focus on a specific area of ministry, this was normally considered as the second item, which broadly seemed to reflect the second agenda item regarding the vision and mission of the church. The standard agenda form was used as the structure for note-taking by the administrator. He would make some very brief notes on a blank of the standard form, notes which would point to the discussions that had happened, but mainly recorded any outcomes or decisions.

Normally after the first item, of testimony for encouragement, where staff members briefly shared things which they had found positive or encouraging, the chair asked what items people wanted to raise, and these were noted by the chair, and were picked up later in the meeting.

Towards the end of the observation process, partly in response to some feedback from me, the team changed their standard agenda. The revised version is set out at Appendix 15. Although most of the previous items were carried over from

the old agenda, the big change was in relation to items raised by team members: they were required to notify these in advance, by 10.30 a.m. of the day of meeting, and to indicate whether the item was for discussion, for decision, or for information, and what its level of priority was. However, I did not get to see this pattern being used regularly, as it was only introduced on the last meeting observed.

The All Saints staff meeting was usually finished by either the vicar or one of the other team members offering a brief prayer to close the gathering.

In addition to the weekly staff team meetings, the team did some other activities together, including: having staff prayers together first thing every day for those that were in the church building on that day; having lunch together once a month; and holding a 48-hour time away together once a year. Business-wise, once a term they also held a longer planning day together, from 9.30 a.m. until 3.00 p.m.

5. Formation of Agenda for the Two Staff Team Meetings

As we noted in the literature review, how the agenda is formed for a meeting is an important process issue. Let us begin by noting what was observed in the case studies, before moving to an analysis and evaluation. During my observation period, there was no formal agenda for the staff meeting at St Peter's, but there was a regular informal pattern which functioned as an implicit agenda for the meeting. At the very first team meeting observed, before the meeting got started, the senior administrator gave me a copy of the formal notes of the last meeting. I therefore asked the vicar if they worked to a standard agenda. He responded in a light-hearted tone, 'A standard agenda? What's one of those?' He then explained that they built up the agenda from the group members as they went along. He described the process as 'reactive' rather than 'strategic'.²⁶³ His tone suggested that he was joking about the meeting agenda, but it emerged that he was not: there was clearly a pattern that was followed, but it was not set down on paper, and was fairly limited in its structure. It could be summarised as follows:

1. Individual completion of a grid for the week, showing the person's forthcoming meetings or commitments.

²⁶³ Researcher journal STP1

2. Round robin with each person reporting briefly what they were doing in the coming week.
3. Review of what was in the church diary for the week.
4. Round robin facilitated by the chair person (normally the vicar or, in his absence, the senior associate vicar) inviting each staff person in turn to raise any agenda for discussion. Typically no more than one or two items would be mentioned by an individual, and some would pass. Items were discussed immediately, as they were raised.

So the approach to agenda formation was fairly simple and unplanned in relation to items raised by staff. The meeting was scheduled to last about an hour and a half.

In contrast to St Peter's, All Saints had a detailed and ambitious standard written agenda, set out as follows:

1. Testimony for encouragement.
2. The Vision and Mission: Glorify, Grow and Go.
3. Items from the last meeting: have we done the action points?
4. Review of last week.
5. Review of Sunday (i.e. the services).
6. Dates / Planning for the week ahead.
7. Planning and notices for next Sunday.
8. Advance dates to note.
9. Planning for upcoming events.
- 10., 11., 12., 13., 14. (left blank for items raised by staff at the beginning of the meeting).
15. People and pastoral issues.
16. Report back from Meetings.
17. Highlight things to communicate to others.
18. How was this meeting? Have we fulfilled the purpose?

Although at first sight All Saints had a more structured agenda, in practice the approach to the main content items was as informal as that of St Peter's because all the main discussion items were elicited at the beginning of the meeting from the staff who were present.

All Saints had a longer scheduled meeting of two hours, perhaps unsurprising given the extent of the agenda. However, as it turned out, the agenda was never covered in full, even though the meeting would regularly over-run. In practice most meetings started with a brief opening prayer, then item 1 (testimony for encouragement). Item 2, on the vision and mission, was typically used to hear a report on one individual staff person's area of ministry, or at least one aspect of it. It was rare to cover item 3, reviewing action points from the previous meeting. Items 4 (review of last week) and 5 (review of Sunday services) were normally covered. Sometimes item 6 (planning for the week ahead) would be covered, but more typically the agenda moved from item 5 to item 9 (planning for upcoming events) and then to the specific items raised by team members at the beginning of the meeting. These specific items would normally take up at least half of the meeting. Occasionally an individual would be discussed under item 15 (people and pastoral issues). However, during the observation of the team, the last three agenda items were never specifically covered. Occasionally, under earlier items of the agenda, there might be a report back from another meeting (item 16) or discussion of things to communicate to others (item 17). The process review question at the end of the agenda (Item 18 – How was this meeting? Have we fulfilled the purpose?), was never covered during the observation period.

Moving to an analysis and evaluation of what was observed, let us note that Rendle and Beaumont see following a standard format as one of four key practices of productive and effective staff meetings:

A predictable and dependable agenda for meetings will allow and instruct staff to share information and raise questions in a helpful way. Knowing what to expect in an agenda for the staff meeting allows the staff person to know how and when to contribute his or her part to the work of the team.²⁶⁴

Both the meetings at St Peter's and at All Saints met the criterion for predictability and dependability, and the staff generally knew what to expect. However, the shape of the agenda also affected the extent to which items of real concern to staff members got raised. Rendle and Beaumont offer three examples for the way the staff meeting might be structured: an informal model, a questions format, and a model with selective participation by different staff according to the nature of

²⁶⁴ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, pp.195-196

agenda being considered within different parts of the meeting.²⁶⁵ During my observation period, St Peter's clearly followed a type of the informal model, while All Saints followed a mix between a formal agenda, with an informal gathering of the main items for discussion at the beginning of the meeting. Rendle and Beaumont make the observation that 'The risk of an informal agenda is to invite a form of "work avoidance" – saving the more difficult conversations until there is not enough time to work on them appropriately'.²⁶⁶ This proved to be the case on several occasions at St Peter's when the vicar closed down the discussion on the grounds that they were short of time – although the reality was that the meetings would often finish well before the target time on such occasions, and so time was in greater supply than he claimed, or at least perceived it to be. A further risk of an informal agenda is that participants may simply avoid raising significant or strategic agenda items altogether. In the case of St Peter's this may have been reinforced by the vicar's understanding of the purpose of the weekly staff meeting whose aim he said, in interview, was 'to deal with the immediate'. In this meeting therefore:

We would deal with things that were then coming up in the next week probably, or planning ahead, but the immediate, rather than the more detailed, more open agenda, debates that would take place off-site ... They would happen on the staff planning days.

So the staff planning days were seen by the vicar as the occasion for more substantive discussions. However, since these days only happened once a term, hence three times a year, this was potentially inadequate for the staff of such a large church. The need for a fuller and more structured agenda for the weekly staff meetings at St Peter's was articulated by one of the associate vicars during interview:

I think we could have a regular agenda for the Monday morning, so every week we automatically went through a review of Sunday's worship, pastoral [situations], etc. And I think actually that agenda would help [the vicar], because he's terribly well organised, and he would keep to that as well, I think that would be helpful to him. It would be helpful to all of us, because ... it [would] stop us drifting off a bit into other areas.

She points here to the value of a discipline of covering key activities and tasks, such as worship services and pastoral care, to ensure that these are regularly reviewed; and also to the value of a more structured agenda in helping staff to maintain their

²⁶⁵ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.201-204

²⁶⁶ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.202

focus within the meeting. However, in her subsequent comments, she points to a further issue:

We have been invited to give items for longer consideration at the end of each meeting now, that's a new thing, which I think is a good idea, to have longer discussion about various things. But I must admit I haven't felt terribly inspired to suggest anything, whether because I thought ... I mean I have got a number of big issues, but ... I haven't felt there's an open door and it's not been welcomed that I should raise some of the issues.

This development, of inviting staff to raise items for longer discussion in the weekly staff meeting, had arisen after my observation of the team. However, the associate vicar points to a key pre-condition for this to work, which is a sense that the vicar as team leader genuinely welcomes 'big issues' being raised. There are a variety of ways this openness could be demonstrated, such as the vicar asking a staff person individually what topic they might like to raise, possibly in private before the meeting. A key factor is likely to be the vicar *demonstrating* his or her active welcome of difficult or big issues being raised (rather than simply *saying* he welcomed them), especially in the initial period of a new approach, if it is to become normalised in the culture of the group.

As explained, although All Saints appeared to have a more structured agenda, in practice the main content items were gathered as informally as at St Peter's. The main discussion items were elicited at the beginning of the meeting from those present. As at St Peter's an obvious weakness in this approach was that there was no attempt to prioritise the items or to establish what length of discussion should be given to a particular item. I therefore commented on this to the vicar of All Saints in my discussions with him towards the end of the observation process, once we had agreed my shift out of a purely observational role (see Appendix 11). It was striking that he paid heed to the comment, and addressed it by a change that occurred at the final staff meeting observed at St Peter's: he introduced a revised standard agenda form, and proposed that all agenda items raised by staff should be notified by 10.30 a.m. in the morning ahead of the staff meeting which started at 2.00 p.m. Staff members were also to indicate whether the item was for information, discussion or decision, and whether it was low, medium or high priority – although there were still no time parameters set. In addition, the agenda sheet included a list of outstanding action points, hence increasing the level of

accountability. In interview, nearly four months after my last observation, the church administrator commented on this shift:

I don't think we prepare terribly well for [our staff meetings], although I'm trying really hard to change the culture and understanding of that, so we now have a formal agenda which is agreed in advance rather than perhaps what we used to do when people just used to turn up and say, 'Here are five things I've suddenly thought of that I want to talk about.'

In my interview with the vicar, he highlighted this shift as an improvement in their staff meetings since the observation process:

We have a clearer agenda-setting process now than we did hitherto, which helps us to stay focused and [have] a clear agenda which is agreed beforehand. We've also re-ordered the order in which we do things, so we give more time priority to things which we have agreed as a team are more important, so that they don't get squeezed at the end of a meeting when everyone's looking at the clock.

Prioritising agenda, as the vicar of All Saints was seeking to do here, and ensuring that important items get adequate agenda time, is one way of facilitating a healthy engagement with potential conflict or disagreement within the group. If the vicar or chair person says: 'This is an important item, and we are going to spend up to (say) 30 minutes discussing it', then participants know that there is space for disagreement, and that if the discussion is going to go on that long they are going to need to articulate any disagreement among them, and the chair person will need to help elicit this, if the discussion is to avoid being boring. Or at least there will be a need to clarify the consensus and then test how solid the consensus is; or potentially have someone play a devil's advocate role, either consciously or unconsciously. Or alternatively this could be done as a group, by the chair person asking: 'OK, so it's clear that we have a consensus among us. What might we be missing? What could be the drawbacks or downsides of moving in the direction we've proposed?' This would provide a sort of force field analysis, weighing the pros and cons of a particular plan or proposal.

Observation of the St Peter's staff meetings suggested that the reverse can also be true: when there is a sense (often implicit, rather than explicit) that the group must get the meeting over and done with as quickly as possible, then people are much more likely to hold back from expressing disagreement than if they know there is going to be space for different views to emerge, whether or not there is an explicit encouragement or invitation to voice that disagreement.

The issue of agenda formation ties into two of the theological strands that will be picked up in the next chapter. First is the practice of oversight: deciding what the staff team will spend its time on is a key matter to be ‘watched over’ and determined by the incumbent. Second is the issue of consciously giving space to working at peacemaking and reconciliation within the staff team, by exploring disagreements and tensions within the group. The staff team meeting can be a key opportunity for this to happen, as different views are explored, tested and reconciled in some way, if only on a provisional basis.

6. How Disagreements Were Typically Settled in the Team Meetings

The first research question being explored through this project was: ‘How do the incumbents and ministry staff teams of large churches deal with their disagreements, differences and tensions – i.e. with (low-level) conflict, as so defined – within their team meetings?’ This is therefore primarily a question about process – the ‘how’ – rather than a question about outcomes. However, one of the items recorded in relation to the disagreements that surfaced in the observed staff team meetings was how those disagreements were settled at the time, that is, what the outcome of each disagreement was within the meeting. The results were striking, and seem worth recording here, before going on to the detailed aspects of how the disagreements were handled, as those processes may well illuminate why this pattern of outcomes was reached. (As the focus of the research is on the *process* of how disagreements were handled, no list of the content of the disagreements is provided. However, a good number are described in the subsequent sections.)

As explained above (see page 56), the following scheme of categorisation was used in the observation process for recording how disagreements were settled:²⁶⁷

1. *No resolution.* The conflict or disagreement remains unresolved.
2. *Vicar-imposed resolution.* The vicar proposes a resolution and indicates that this is the decisive outcome, regardless of the quality of the proposal.

²⁶⁷ This coding scheme is slightly adapted from Nastasi and Clements, ‘Observational coding scheme’, pp.26-27

3. *Social dominance.* An outcome or solution is socially imposed by one of the team members, and the others acquiesce.
4. *Social negotiation.* Team members resolve the conflict through mutual negotiation on a purely social basis (e.g. ‘We used X’s idea last time, let’s use Y’s idea this time’).
5. *Idea dominance.* The resolution is imposed by one team member based on the claimed quality of the idea(s) proposed (e.g. ‘I think the option that best addresses the problem is ...’), and the other team members acquiesce, without exploring a range of options.
6. *Idea negotiation.* The resolution is reached by mutual agreement of team members, typically following discussion of the merits of alternative perspectives and options. Agreement may reflect the decision to accept one of the proposed options or a compromise between opposing ideas or options.
7. *Idea synthesis.* The resolution reflects a synthesis of opposing viewpoints or positions. The final resolution is an integration of different ideas into a qualitatively different solution.

I also asked interviewees about this, in a much simpler form, by asking to what extent they considered that any disagreements were typically worked out through negotiation between team members, and to what extent they were mainly settled by the vicar determining the way forward (see item 16 of Appendix 12). I selected these two as the options which I considered had been most frequently used during the observation process – prior to carrying out the full data analysis of my observation notes. Subsequent analysis of the observation journals, after the interviews were conducted, revealed the following:

Table A: Outcomes to disagreements during the observation process

Type of outcome	St Peter’s	%	All Saints	%
No resolution	11	46%	9	38%
Vicar-determined	7	29%	6	25%
Idea negotiation	5	21%	7	29%
Idea dominance	0	0%	2	8%
Social dominance	1	4%	0	0%
TOTAL	24	100%	24	100%

(Note: Neither ‘idea synthesis’ nor ‘social negotiation’ were used in either team as ways of determining the outcome in any of the disagreements observed.)

My basic sense had been correct, that where there was a resolution it was most likely to be either an idea negotiation or a vicar-determined outcome. However, what I had not adequately picked up when preparing the interview schedule was that the most likely outcome, when there was a disagreement in both team meetings, was no resolution at all.

Of the occasions when no resolution was reached in the **St Peter's** staff team meetings, four of these were situations where I observed that the vicar felt cornered or unhappy with the way the discussion was going, and – as I perceived it – used a lack of resolution as a way of avoiding an outcome that he would have been unhappy with, along with the possible prospect (I suspected) that by not resolving the matter within the team meeting, he might be able to secure his preferred outcome.²⁶⁸ One of these occasions was a situation where the senior associate vicar was chairing in the vicar's place, and could not secure agreement to his proposal at that point, so he deferred the decision – but I formed a strong impression based on the strength of his expressed view that he was determined to secure the outcome that he had proposed.²⁶⁹

If my reading of these situations was accurate, then all five of these occasions where there was no outcome within the meeting could be categorised as potentially having vicar-determined outcomes in terms of the disagreement. This would change the statistics significantly, with a vicar-determined outcome occurring in 50% of the occasions observed, and no resolution in only 25%. This would fit my overall impression of the dynamics at St Peter's, with the vicar appearing to regularly exercise a determinative influence on outcomes, including at times through a lack of resolution to a disagreement.

The perceptions of the three St Peter's team members interviewed were divergent when I asked them to what extent disagreements were typically worked out through negotiation between team members, or else settled by the vicar determining the way forward. In his response, the vicar initially hedged his bets, and did not commit himself, and said that it would be interesting to see how other staff perceived the question. When I pressed him for his perception, he said that the outcome would vary. On more minor matters he indicated that sometimes he would

²⁶⁸ Researcher journals STP1, STP7 and STP12

²⁶⁹ Researcher journal STP10

listen to the different views, and then make a decision; but on more significant matters he would look to discern and articulate the mind of the group, even if that went counter to his own view. On further questioning he said that he hoped and thought that negotiation within the group was the more common approach than him settling matters. However, he conceded that sometimes he could influence the discussion through unspoken – and sometimes unconscious – signals and body language that his colleagues might pick up on.

The perspective of the head administrator, whom I would see as someone who was notably supportive of and loyal to the vicar, was:

I think the majority [of disagreements] are settled internally with us working together, and they may actually be smaller things anyway. So it could be the bigger things that [the vicar] says, ‘OK, this is the way we’re going to go’, but they are the minority of occurrences as well.

So she shared the vicar’s perception that an idea negotiation was the most frequent outcome, but unlike the vicar she thought he was more likely to determine the outcome where the matter was important, and to leave the more frequent ‘smaller things’ to be negotiated among the team. In contrast, the associate vicar whom I interviewed considered that outcomes were ‘largely determined by the vicar’, adding, ‘and sometimes that’s right’. Her perspective seemed a better match with what I had observed than the view of either the vicar or head administrator. Her perspective was not a surprise for me, given her view (explained below, page 100) that theirs was ‘a very hierarchical set-up’. Later, in interview, she said:

For me I think sometimes we rush too soon for closure, but I’m a Myers Briggs P and I’m working under a very J person, and so I can’t expect someone to be what they’re not.²⁷⁰ So I mean obviously that’s difficult, because you’ve got very strong personalities at this meeting in a way that you don’t always get in all meetings.

This perspective is interesting given the frequency with which no resolution was the outcome reached during the meetings observed: this did not seem to have registered with her (although the frequency of no resolution is lower if my adjusted figures are taken). Her comment also shows an awareness of how personal style preferences impact the outcomes, and expresses the expectation that the vicar’s style preferences will tend to be determinative of what happens. Certainly the pattern at St Peter’s

²⁷⁰ The reference here is to the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, and the contrast between someone with a Perceiving style, who likes things open-ended, and someone with a Judging style, who likes things to be resolved and concluded.

would accord with the strong achieving-directing style type of the vicar, a style which would tend to expect to set direction, determine outcomes and have the last word.²⁷¹

I would make a final observation on the trend at St Peter's: when the vicar was absent, the senior associate vicar who picked up the reins chairing the meetings also then tended to determine (or seemed to want to determine) the outcome of discussions, and thus to follow the pattern set by the vicar.²⁷² This also fitted comfortably with his own achieving-directing style.

One striking contrast with the **All Saints** staff team is that while the vicar at All Saints had a tendency to seek to determine outcomes, when he was challenged by one or more of his colleagues he would typically be willing to enter into a negotiation, and so an idea negotiation was more common at All Saints than in the St Peter's staff meetings, occurring in nearly a third of the instances observed. In part this reflected the vicar's Gilmore-Fraleigh style, which was achieving-directing in calm (like the vicar of St Peter's) but shifts into accommodating-harmonising in storm, a stress shift which might be triggered when facing disagreement or challenge by a colleague. Of the occasions when there was no resolution at All Saints, only two of these might fall into the category of instances where the vicar was uncomfortable with where the discussion was going, and wanted to avoid reaching a conclusion – and which might therefore potentially be categorised as vicar-determined outcomes.²⁷³ If that adjustment is made, then vicar-determined outcomes increase to one third, and no resolution reduces to 29%.

What is striking about the All Saints instances where no resolution was reached is that they occurred after (often quite rambling) discussion which was inconclusive, and with no clarity reached about how the issue might be addressed in future, if at all. This was picked up on by one of those interviewed, the minister in training, who commented that their outcomes were usually settled by negotiation 'or nothing happens ... there may be no outcome'. This was striking because it was not an option offered in the question, but was clearly something she was aware of, which was not raised by any other interviewee, but which accurately reflected the

²⁷¹ References here and subsequently are to the types in Gilmore and Fraleigh, *The Friendly Style Profile for Communication at Work*.

²⁷² These outcomes are recorded in the statistics at Table A as vicar-determined outcomes where the vicar was absent and the associate vicar was in the chair, as he was thereby assuming the vicar's role.

²⁷³ Researcher journals AS6 and AS10

reality in about a third of the disagreements observed at All Saints. She continued by noting, ‘or things are left on the to-do list for a long period of time ... and so nothing happens, or they fall off the agenda because they get forgotten about’. This last comment fitted with my perception that it was relatively common for an issue, on which there had been an inconclusive discussion with no outcome, to get forgotten about and not be revisited at a later meeting.

There was a consensus among the three interviewed at All Saints that idea negotiation was the predominant way outcomes were reached, in large part because of the vicar’s personality style. Both the vicar and the administrator were clear on this. In interview the administrator said:

Well, I think they’re mainly determined by negotiation [among] team members. I’m not sure I can think of any examples really where [the vicar] has gone, ‘This is what we’re going to do’ ... I mean it’s not his style.

This is matched by the vicar’s own perception:

I’d say almost universally it’s a collaborative consensus decision. I think there are very few issues on which I would ever I think say, ‘No, this is what we’re doing’, partly because that’s not my personality style, nor do I think it’s a good ... way to lead, in fact I’d say the opposite, I think that’s a bad way to lead, because what it does is people don’t have ownership of the decision, so they’re not behind it, so it never really works anyway.

These comments are striking in the face of the evidence that in the case of at least a quarter of the disagreements I observed, the outcomes were determined by the vicar. On closer examination, however, the nature of these outcomes shows that in several cases the vicar was prescriptive about process (e.g. the need for the youth worker to clear something with the DCC, or the need for certain child protection checks to be carried out) rather than about an outcome which suited his personal preferences or opinions. In fact there was only one occasion where this was the case, late on in the observation process, when the vicar introduced a proposal that they should rotate the chairing of the staff team meetings.²⁷⁴ He received one affirmative comment from the curate, did not wait for anyone else to respond and certainly did not check whether there were any reservations. Instead he immediately moved to implementation by saying, ‘Now we need to come up with a rota.’ Such an approach was exceptional for him, but did contradict his stated convictions about how to exercise leadership. As noted above, it seemed he was more likely to

²⁷⁴ Researcher journal AS12

negatively use his influence by avoiding reaching a conclusion on a proposal made by another team member, when he was unhappy with the proposal.

There was an interesting supplementary comment by the administrator in his interview when he remarked, ‘And if he has done it [i.e. determined the outcome], it’s been so gentle <chuckles> I haven’t noticed.’ This points to the vicar’s generally warm and friendly approach, drawing on the accommodating-harmonising strand within his style profile, which in combination with his achieving-directing style meant he could move quickly, and potentially impose on others without them noticing, or at least without leaving them feeling that they had been put upon. (The risk is that something he pushed through in this gentle way might come back to bite him at a later stage, when team members’ feelings caught up with what had happened.)

Another difference between the All Saints team and the St Peter’s team was that the All Saints team had one member who was occasionally able to secure imposition of his preferred way: hence the two instances of idea dominance at All Saints.²⁷⁵ These outcomes were achieved by the youth worker at All Saints. I would attribute two main factors as contributing to him being able to secure occasional idea dominance. One was his Gilmore-Fraleigh style, which was achieving-directing in calm, and shifted into affiliating-perfecting in storm, with achieving-directing remaining as a strong back-up: this meant that he got more engaged, with stronger emotions, when he was feeling under pressure or really cared about the issue. Second was the fact that he was strongly embedded in the church, having grown up in the church and held a number of voluntary youth leadership roles prior to his current full-time position. In conjunction with a vicar who could shift into accommodating-harmonising mode under pressure, the combination of these two meant that the youth worker could sometimes make an impassioned appeal for his view and secure the acquiescence of his colleagues. (The only person within the St Peter’s team in a comparable position was the head administrator, who had a more even or flat style profile, and was generally more conflict-avoiding in her style.)

In conclusion we note that the most frequent outcome in both teams when there was a disagreement was for no resolution (at least within the staff team

²⁷⁵ Researcher journals AS4 and AS6

meeting), while the two other most common outcomes were for the vicar to determine the outcome or for the team to negotiate a way forward.

7. Conflict Avoidance and Discouragement of Disagreement

As the project's primary research question was about how incumbents and ministry staff teams deal with their disagreements, one key item on the observation schedule (see Appendix 7) was whether anyone, especially the chair person, welcomed differences of opinion being expressed; and whether there was any discouragement of disagreement being expressed.

From my first observation of the St Peter's staff team, I picked up a tendency by the vicar – and the staff team generally – to avoid disagreement, and especially to close down discussion once disagreement or tension had emerged. There were specific instances which seemed to point to this pattern in each of the first seven meetings that I observed, as explained below. From the eighth meeting observed onwards, the dynamics were then affected by a significant development in the vicar's health, but the pattern persisted.

In the first observed team meeting there arose a disagreement between the vicar and the other three clergy on the team concerning the forum for addressing the question of the church's service of the poor.²⁷⁶ This was an issue which had been raised for them by their attendance at a conference together. The vicar saw service to the poor as a mission-related issue which should therefore be discussed with the mission committee, while the three other clergy saw it as a justice-related issue to be picked up in a different forum within the church. The discussion became positional, with each side asserting their view without exploring deeper concerns. By this stage the vicar was outnumbered and, it appeared, was feeling cornered. He then closed down the discussion for the stated reason that there was a shortage of time. He did not summarise the discussion or indicate how it might be taken forward at a later point. Instead he announced a decision on a separate matter, saying that they would attend the same conference together as a staff team every other year, but without any discussion of this and without checking whether there was support for this decision or not.

²⁷⁶ Researcher journal STP1

There are two initial observations to make about this incident. First, the apparent impact of the vicar closing down the discussion was that it seemed to discourage disagreement being expressed on the items that followed (although the subsequent issues raised were potentially less contentious ones). Second, I was left with the impression that the vicar's closing down of the discussion, as described, was likely to result in killing off the item over which there had been disagreement, with the result that the issue would not be addressed again in a future team meeting. (It was not revisited during any of the meetings that I observed.) If he so chose, this would allow the vicar to take the matter forward in the way that he wanted, without addressing the different view of his colleagues.

It seems worth noting that the behaviour which the vicar had modelled here was repeated the following week, in my second observation, by the associate vicar, Gary, when he was chairing the staff team meeting in the vicar's absence. During the meeting there was only one substantive item on which there was some tension and disagreement.²⁷⁷ The issue concerned the availability of the children and families worker, Paul, to assist with the holiday club at Weston Church, the congregation led by one of the associate vicars, Harriet. The conflict had arisen because Greenacres, the independent Evangelical church with which St Peter's had a close working relationship, had decided to move their holiday club from the summer to the Easter holidays. This created a clash with Weston Church's holiday club which for some time had been planned for the Easter holidays. Harriet spoke rather heatedly about the difficult relationship between St Peter's, the parent church, and Weston Church. She said that she was keen to strengthen the relationship between St Peter's and Weston, and wanted the children's worker Paul to assist with Weston's holiday club as a way of contributing to this. Paul said that he had made a commitment to Greenacres to assist them with their holiday club, and did not consider that he could go back on that. Concern was expressed by some of the other staff, including Gary, about Greenacres changing the timing of their holiday club without consulting St Peter's. Harriet wanted to contribute further, but Gary, the senior associate who was chairing the meeting, stopped her, indicating that they did not have much time to discuss this issue, and that he wanted to draw the discussion towards a close. He briefly allowed anyone else who had not yet spoken to offer a

²⁷⁷ Researcher journal STP2

single contribution, and then said that they would revisit the item the following week when Matthew, the vicar, was back.

Commenting on what I observed I note that as I watched the discussion being closed down, I assumed that there must be some other significant agenda that was going to be discussed in the meeting, which was creating the time pressure that Gary had named. However, this proved not to be the case and the meeting ended about 35 minutes ahead of its target ending time. So the argument by the associate vicar about a lack of time to discuss the issue appeared to be unfounded. I was therefore reminded of how the vicar had handled the uncomfortable item the previous week.

At my third observation the following week the item regarding the holiday clubs was revisited, raised by Gary, the senior associate vicar, who presented the issue and an overview of the discussion that had happened at the previous week's meeting.²⁷⁸ The vicar, Matthew, responded quickly by saying that this was part of a wider issue of communication with Greenacres Church following the premature departure of their minister. The associate vicar, Harriet, explained quite calmly – in contrast to her manner the previous week – why it would be helpful for Paul, the children and families worker, to assist with the Weston Church holiday club. The vicar, Matthew, seemed to try to close down any further discussion by saying that what Paul did was a line management issue for him as the vicar to sort out, and that he would address the issue in a one-to-one meeting with Paul, with the implication that he as the vicar would decide which of the holiday clubs Paul would help with.

Nevertheless, the associate vicar, Gary, did not want to let it rest there and insisted that there was still a question of principle about Greenacres changing their holiday club dates without consulting St Peter's when it was going to have an impact on St Peter's. He thought this needed to be addressed if their aim of collaborative working between the two churches was to be meaningful. However, Matthew did not allow the discussion to continue any further, and said that it would be something which he would pick up at his next meeting with one of the elders at Greenacres. That is where the matter was left, and so any further discussion or disagreement was avoided.

²⁷⁸ Researcher journal STP3

It is worth noting at this point, as commentary, that the relationship between St Peter's and Greenacres Church seemed to be somewhat anxiety-laden. This was apparent from the exchanges in the two meetings reported above. It also emerged at the twelfth meeting in the observation process, when the relationship with Greenacres again entered the staff meeting discussions.²⁷⁹ At that meeting, one of the team expressed a concern about Greenacres borrowing some lights belonging to the St Peter's children's work without securing permission. One of the associate vicars, Harriet, said that she thought there was a problem with the attitude being shown by Greenacres who seemed to assume that they could come and help themselves to St Peter's things without first getting permission. The children's worker and the youth worker then both spoke up to support this concern. However, the vicar interrupted the discussion, and resisted seeing the concerns being explored or developed. Although the other associate vicar, Gary, sought to try and take some of the blame, as he had some involvement in the planning of the event organised by Greenacres, the vicar cut off any further discussion, essentially leaving it unresolved, and moved onto the next agenda item.

These two different exchanges, some weeks apart, pointed to an anxiety in the relationship with Greenacres Church, which the vicar appeared to be unwilling to explore in the St Peter's staff meeting, although no reason was stated for this within the meetings observed. (At the end of my third observation meeting, at which Greenacres was discussed, the vicar explained to me privately something of Greenacres' recent history, and his own and St Peter's relationship with the former minister of Greenacres, which offered some clues to the sources of anxiety.²⁸⁰ However, none of this was articulated within the staff meeting itself, although the rest of the staff team were presumably aware of the history.)

At the fourth staff meeting observed, there was a much smaller example of avoiding disagreement or conflict within the team meeting at St Peter's.²⁸¹ One of the associate vicars raised a query about the programming of events being held as part of a national mission initiative (called 'A Passion for Life'), and what the merits were of holding events on Saturday versus midweek in the evening. There was some discussion, with some emerging disagreement between the two associate

²⁷⁹ Researcher journal STP12

²⁸⁰ Researcher journal STP3

²⁸¹ Researcher journal STP4

vicars, Harriet and Gary. However, the vicar, Matthew, did not allow this disagreement to develop, and asked the two of them to sort out any disagreement elsewhere, outside the staff meeting.

A further example of avoiding disagreement or conflict was evident at the fifth staff meeting observed at St Peter's.²⁸² The incident occurred relatively late on in the meeting. (And as I observed the meeting, it struck me that there was scope for more tension or disagreement than the meeting had experienced up to that point, as I noted in my researcher journal.²⁸³) The conversation related to a small prayer initiative that they had developed as a church which involved praying for one person at a certain time each day. The senior of the two associate vicars, Gary, raised the issue of this prayer challenge, and wanted to check that staff members were meeting the challenge, since he thought that they should be setting an example as the staff in relation to any challenge they set before the wider congregation. The children's worker, Paul, responded quickly and said that he had actually identified two people and explained who they were, and why he had chosen them. However, the vicar, Matthew, then intervened in a polite but relatively forceful way, and said that he did not want to put people on the spot over this. Gary joked that it was good to have put Paul on the spot, but then completely dropped the issue that he had raised, and did not question the vicar's dismissal of it.

There are a few observations to make about this incident. First, it was striking that Matthew did not pick up on Gary's underlying concern: this concern was about the need for the staff team to lead by example on something which they as leaders had called the church members to commit to doing. No one else on the team challenged the vicar about this. Second, one of the staff, the associate vicar, Harriet, was not present for this meeting. Had she been present, I wondered whether she might have had the courage to challenge the vicar. Third, the meeting finished early at about 12.10 p.m., after less than an hour, and some 35 minutes before the target ending point. So there was plenty of time to have explored the issue if they had wanted to engage with the disagreement; but the opportunity to work through some low-level conflict was passed by. Finally, it was at this stage in the observation process that I began to wonder whether this incident was indicative of a general

²⁸² Researcher journal STP5

²⁸³ Researcher journal STP5

pattern of conflict avoidance by the vicar in staff meetings, as noted in my researcher journal, and which subsequent analysis confirmed.²⁸⁴

At the sixth team meeting observed, there was an incident where I, as the researcher, felt that I was sucked into the conflict avoidance pattern of the group.²⁸⁵ The meeting was drawing towards a close, and none of the items raised had elicited any articulated disagreement – although I was conscious that two of the team members (one of the associate vicars and the senior administrator) who were more likely to express disagreement were missing from the meeting. Initially I became a minor contributor to the meeting because there was discussion of a staff quiet day at a retreat centre on a Monday late in January. As their staff meetings were normally on Mondays, I asked for clarification of whether there would be a regular staff meeting as part of the quiet day. The vicar explained that there would not be; it would simply be a time with some input from a guest speaker along with individual silent reflection. He added that I would be welcome to join them; and I replied that I was unlikely be able to take up the invitation.

Possibly because there was so little agenda that had been raised by the staff and therefore plenty of time available, the vicar then asked me if there was anything I wanted to raise. I said that I had a couple of questions: about the timing of distributing the style profile which I wanted them all to complete, and about whether one of the church's administrators, Rachel, should be included in the circle for completing the style profile and processing the results, given that she had a slightly special role with the staff team, and was present at the beginning of the team meetings when they reviewed the diary, and was also the most senior of the staff in the office who were not otherwise part of the core staff team.

We agreed that I would issue the style profiles at the first staff meeting in the New Year. Then the vicar, Matthew, invited comments from everyone on the second question about Rachel. The associate vicar, Gary, said that he was not in favour of including Rachel. The pastoral minister, Mary, did not directly express a view one way or the other, but did question why Rachel should be included – which could have been read as a preference that Rachel not to be included. However, the children's worker, Paul, and the youth worker, Joe, both indicated support for including Rachel. So there was not a common mind, and potentially there was some

²⁸⁴ Researcher journal STP5

²⁸⁵ Researcher journal STP6

disagreement that could have been explored. (The vicar, Matthew, did not directly express his view at any point.) However, I then headed off the conflict by making a proposal that Rachel not be included, on the basis that she was not part of the core team which was the focus of the research project, and that she could always complete the style profile at a later point. The group seemed to accept my proposal readily, although the vicar did not check whether anyone had any reservations, but instead summarised what he thought he had heard from the group, which essentially supported my proposal that Rachel be omitted.

Reflecting after the meeting, I was bemused that I had rushed so quickly to head off an emerging conflict.²⁸⁶ In my working role with Bridge Builders I would normally have wanted to draw the conflict out into the open, and would have sought to work with it – for example by asking Paul and Joe to say more about why they thought it would be good to include Rachel. At the time I wondered whether I was affected by the prevailing culture of the meeting and group, which seemed to want to avoid conflict if possible. I also wondered whether perhaps I was uncomfortable with the shift in role that had happened, with me becoming a participant in the group for a short while. While it was a shift for me to contribute to the content of the staff meeting, I was used to being a participant in the group's social and prayer time prior to the business section. Although the shift in role might have compounded matters, my subsequent reflection was that I was most affected by the culture of conflict avoidance in the group.

However, one other factor might have contributed to the dynamics, which is worth commenting on. The meeting was on 14 December. It is possible that the proximity to Christmas had an impact, and that at some unconscious level the team members felt that they should be more peaceable and avoid conflict more determinedly, because it was the Advent season. There was no way of testing this hypothesis. However, at the following week's meeting on 21 December, my seventh observing, most of the staff did not raise any item for discussion and passed when it came to their turn; and the vicar then made the observation that he thought they were wanting to get away early to get to their staff Christmas lunch, which followed the meeting.²⁸⁷ I note by way of commentary that he was expressing a consciousness of

²⁸⁶ Researcher journal STP6

²⁸⁷ Researcher journal STP7

outside factors that might influence their willingness to engage with issues which would require discussion.

On Sunday 3 January 2010 I received an email from the senior administrator informing me that the vicar had experienced a significant health incident over Christmas, that he was doing well and was at home but would not be at work for around a month. She said that the rest of the staff were ‘continuing as normal’ and that they looked forward to seeing me at the staff meeting the next day. (As reported above, see page 58, I had mixed feelings about this news.) The next day was the eighth staff meeting that I was observing, and I noted in my journal my expectation that there would be little expressed disagreement because this was the first meeting of the team without the vicar, following his health incident.²⁸⁸ My prediction proved correct. The meeting finished at least 20 minutes earlier than their normal target ending time. Although there were a few issues which arose on which there initially seemed to be some differences of view, the senior associate vicar, Gary, who was chairing the meeting, did not give these any space to develop. There seemed to be a clear background anxiety in the group given the vicar’s health situation. At the same time I observed (based on his manner, rather than anything concrete) that, at that stage, Gary was relishing the prospect of being in charge for a month or so, and was not worried about the vicar’s absence.

There was a similar avoidance of disagreement or conflict the following week, at my ninth observation.²⁸⁹ When one item did look as though it might develop into a disagreement, the senior administrator, Martha, and the other administrator, Rachel, proposed that they could work out a solution to the issue between them, which avoided the need for further discussion and any development of the disagreement. Gary, the associate vicar who was chairing, was quick to accept this outcome. Otherwise, none of the items that were raised generated disagreement.

It was not until the following week – the third after the vicar’s health crisis – that the St Peter’s staff engaged with some open disagreement in their team meeting without the vicar present.²⁹⁰ The meeting (my tenth observing) was again being chaired by Gary, the senior associate vicar, and by this point he was showing

²⁸⁸ Researcher journal STP8

²⁸⁹ Researcher journal STP9

²⁹⁰ Researcher journal STP10

some signs of strain under the added pressure that he was facing with the vicar's extended absence. Through the course of the meeting there was a recurring pattern of disagreement between Gary and Harriet, the other associate vicar. Gary adopted a strongly directive approach – possibly an indicator of heightened anxiety on his part – in relation to several issues that arose during the meeting: attendance of the staff at the PCC meeting that week; how the churchwardens should be instructed in relation to the absence of clergy due to their attendance at the licensing of their former curate; and a question about who would lead the prayers at the cross at the Good Friday service in Easter week. Although there were content disagreements between Harriet and Gary, there was also a process issue, about whether Gary could take the lead and simply propose who should do something or what should happen, without an open discussion among them as the staff. With the vicar being absent, Harriet seemed to be challenging this way of operating, and pressing for a more collaborative approach; hence the recurring disagreements in this meeting between her and Gary.

Interestingly as a staff they discussed one of the items coming up on the agenda of the next PCC meeting, which was a video of Gary Hamel, a management guru, speaking at a Willow Creek UK conference in which the main thrust of his presentation was about de-clericalising the church, and empowering the laity to provide leadership. During the course of this discussion, Harriet made the striking observation that 'Here we have a very hierarchical set-up, but the head of the hierarchy isn't here', and expressed her concern that the PCC could find it threatening to discuss a new approach. As one observing the meeting, my own sense was that throughout this meeting's discussions there seemed to be an underlying but unstated question, which was: 'How do we deal with the leadership vacuum created by the vicar's sudden and unexpected absence?'

A full month passed before I was able to join the St Peter's staff for another team meeting, in late February, for what was my eleventh observation.²⁹¹ This also coincided with the return to work of the vicar, Matthew, and was the first staff meeting that he had chaired since his health incident at Christmas. I was looking forward to this meeting, as the group were due to discuss their church's baptism policy, and there were indications that this offered the possibility of some

²⁹¹ Researcher journal STP11

substantive content disagreement. However, when Matthew raised the item for discussion at the meeting, the associate vicar, Gary, said that he had not had time to read the papers and so Matthew directed (to my disappointment) that they should therefore wait to discuss the topic until a future meeting. This outcome was interesting in light of my subsequent theory about the meeting. The whole meeting passed without any expressed disagreement, and was finished in 45 minutes, half the time normally allocated.

I was left wondering, on my journey home, why the meeting had been so short and why there had been virtually no overt disagreement.²⁹² Two possibilities occurred. First, that there was simply nothing contentious on the agenda that was raised. However, this did not seem an adequate explanation. Second, that Matthew and his staff team were in conflict avoidance mode due to Matthew's health situation, with an unspoken desire on everyone's part to avoid any overt tensions and to suppress any conflict, out of concern for Matthew and a desire to avoid him having to face anything that might create additional stress. Although this desire was probably operating at an unconscious level, it seemed the most likely explanation for the avoidance of disagreement. It also seemed to confirm my sense that both the vicar and the St Peter's team as a whole perceived the expression of disagreement as stressful and as something to be avoided. Hence there was probably an unconscious relief at finding a reason to postpone the baptism policy discussion.

By the time of the next observed meeting, two weeks later, the staff were less inhibited about expressing disagreement.²⁹³ However, Matthew, the vicar, again seemed unwilling to allow the disagreements to be developed. The first disagreement to emerge related to the attendance of the clergy from St Peter's at the Deanery Synod. Gary made clear that he was not going, and did not want to go, and it seemed that the vicar, Matthew, was unable to go. Matthew then indicated that he would like Harriet to go to the meeting to represent St Peter's. However, she was resistant because she had a prior commitment which she did not want to forego. Eventually Matthew explained that he thought it important that one of the clergy went because St Peter's had 'form' with the Deanery Synod. Harriet said she was unaware of this negative reputation or history, and asked for more information. Matthew quickly responded with, 'I'll talk to you about it off-line, afterwards', and

²⁹² Researcher journal STP11

²⁹³ Researcher journal STP12

then immediately moved onto the next item on the agenda, so sidelining the issue over which there was some tension.

The second disagreement related to Greenacres Church and their borrowing of the St Peter's lights, as explained above. Again Matthew closed this item down, and moved the discussion onto a new agenda item. Finally there was a disagreement between the children's worker, Paul, and the pastoral worker, Mary, about a group that arrived early prior to the second service on Sunday morning to have coffee together, and who interrupted one of the children's groups from the earlier service. Matthew's approach was to interrupt the discussion, to ask Paul for some information about the ending time of the children's group, and then to make a unilateral decision to move the ending time to a slightly earlier time. So in all three cases the vicar took action to prevent the disagreement being explored.

Having described the specific instances of conflict avoidance, let us move to some broader observations and commentary. In looking at the coding of discouragement of disagreement or conflict in my observation journals, it was striking that all the instances of this pattern occurred in the St Peter's staff meetings, and none in the All Saints' staff meetings. As we have seen, this pattern was shaped by the approach to disagreement within the staff meeting taken by Matthew, the vicar of St Peter's. However, it also appeared to have become part of the culture of the group, and thus the pattern persisted even when the associate vicar, Gary, was chairing the meeting in the vicar's absence.

There were a number of possible reasons why the tendency to avoid conflict was not in evidence in the All Saints team meetings. One contributing factor was probably personal style or approach of the two vicars. When challenged or pressured by another team member at All Saints, Patrick would typically enter into a negotiation or accommodation, whereas at St Peter's, Matthew would typically find a way to avoid or move on from the issue raising the tensions.

A second possible factor was that the All Saints' vicar, Patrick, had only been the incumbent for eighteen months, and several of his staff team had been there longer than him. In contrast, Matthew was the longest-standing member of the team at St Peter's, having been the incumbent for seven years, and all of the team had been brought on board by him. In consequence Matthew probably had greater overall power than Patrick did, within their respective teams, and thus had greater capacity to suppress disagreement.

A third likely factor was that the All Saints team was in a less settled state than the St Peter's team; the purpose of the team meetings at All Saints was continually being negotiated throughout the five-month period of observation, largely as a result of the structural change arising from the creation of the congregational leadership teams. Hence conflict was harder to avoid in the All Saints staff team meetings.

As we have noted in the literature review in Chapter II, in writing about disagreement in team meetings Patrick Lencioni asserts that 'When a group of intelligent people come together to talk about issues that matter, it is both natural and productive for disagreement to occur. Resolving those issues is what makes a meeting productive, engaging, even fun.'²⁹⁴ He therefore sees a need for the chair or leader of a meeting to 'mine' for conflict, and to 'make it a priority to seek out and uncover important issues about which team members do not agree', forcing team members to engage with those issues, even at the risk of unpopularity.²⁹⁵ Likewise, business consultant Larry Dressler sees the active encouragement of 'constructive, respectful disagreement' as one of the key commitments that enables the building of genuine consensus in groups and reaching decisions that people support.²⁹⁶ In the St Peter's team meetings, the vicar seemed to take the opposite path, by repeatedly avoiding the exploration of disagreement, either by cutting off or closing down the discussion of a particular item that was generating disagreement. This seemed regularly to miss the opportunity to explore creative possibilities within the group.

This is not to suggest that it is never appropriate to avoid a conflict. Clearly there are times when this can be an appropriate approach, for example when it avoids 'entanglement in trivial issues'.²⁹⁷ The occurrence at the fourth St Peter's staff meeting, regarding the merits of holding certain events on a Saturday rather than midweek, could be one such example, where avoiding the disagreement may have been appropriate.²⁹⁸ There will also be times when a particular issue of conflict needs to be set aside for a period, or where the group does not have the capacity to engage in a conflict. So potentially it might have been appropriate for the St Peter's

²⁹⁴ Lencioni, *Death by Meeting*, p.229

²⁹⁵ Lencioni, *Death by Meeting*, p.230

²⁹⁶ Larry Dressler, *Consensus Through Conversation: How to Achieve High-Commitment Decisions* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006), p.5

²⁹⁷ Ron Kraybill, *Style Matters: The Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory* (Harrisonburg, VA: Riverhouse ePress, 2005), p.12

²⁹⁸ Researcher journal STP4

team to have avoided conflict at the first meeting when Matthew returned to work following his health incident. However, when avoidance of disagreement becomes an established and recurring pattern, as it was at St Peter's, then this can be problematic. For, as one US consultant asserts, 'Avoiding conflict almost guarantees that we will fail to build relationally deep teams, and that we will be unable to make the best decisions for the organization'.²⁹⁹ This avoidance pattern is far from unique to St Peter's, as the same consultant comments (albeit without substantiating the claim): 'Of all the organizations we work with, churches tend to be the worst at engaging in conflict in an open and honest way.'³⁰⁰

Finally, let us note that this issue of facing into disagreement, or avoiding it, ties into two of the theological strands that will be picked up in the next chapter. I see it as a key oversight responsibility of the incumbent to allow and enable the staff team engage with their disagreements, and in doing so to facilitate the staff team in working at peacemaking and reconciliation.

Let us now turn to some other approaches observed during the research which can make a difference to the effectiveness of a staff meeting and to how the team engages with disagreement.

8. Distinguishing between Content and Process, and Gaining Clarity over Process

In a project looking at how incumbents and ministry staff teams deal with their disagreements in their team meetings, it was not a surprise to discover that both case study teams struggled with a common problem (as explained in the literature review in Chapter II) within their meetings, which is the challenge of distinguishing between content and process, and the need for clarity about process. The 'content' is the problem, topic or agenda item under consideration; while the 'process' is the approach, method or procedure used to address that content. In both sets of team meetings there were times when there was a lack of clarity about process which contributed to difficulties within the meeting.

²⁹⁹ Nancy Otberg, 'Ministry Team Diagnostics: How to Avoid the 5 Most Common Dysfunctions of a Ministry Team', posted 25/4/08, available at www.christianitytoday.com/le/2008/spring/1.40.html [accessed 3/5/11]

³⁰⁰ Otberg, 'Ministry Team Diagnostics'

The very first meeting observed at St Peter's provided one illustration of this problem.³⁰¹ The previous week the staff had together attended a conference organised by Willow Creek. The vicar asked each person to share two or three things that they had found challenging or encouraging. This seemed to be inviting a personal response to the conference. Several of the staff shared along these lines, and three themes or issues started to recur: the challenge of serving the poor; 'over-busyness' in lives and ministry; and how they functioned as a team.

However, at a certain point the process changed, although this was not acknowledged, and proposals started to be made that would address the issues that were being raised. So, as one proposal, the youth worker suggested that they find a project to work on together as a group. The male associate vicar suggested that the events around Christmas could constitute this. Disagreement started to emerge, and after some discussion the vicar suggested that the issue go on the agenda of their next away day. The vicar himself then made a proposal that they address the issue of serving the poor by developing a particular project under the church's mission focus, in discussion with the mission committee. This proposal did not get evaluated: instead, after there was a disagreement about where to locate any project, with the three other clergy seeing it related to justice rather than to mission, the vicar chose to move on and not reach a conclusion.

I would comment that part of the difficulty faced here was caused by a lack of clarity about process. Were the team members simply meant to be identifying issues raised by the conference they had attended, as the vicar's introduction suggested? Or were they meant to be offering proposals to address issues identified? And if the latter, how were those proposals going to be evaluated? None of these process questions was clarified at the time.

While there was an occasional lack of clarity over process in the St Peter's team meetings, it was a more regular issue in the team meetings at All Saints. The problem was most evident in a regularly occurring agenda item, scheduled early on in the meeting, when a staff person was asked to make a presentation on an aspect of their ministry. The vicar had explained to me that this was a relatively new element in their team meetings. However, there appeared to be a lack of clarity about the purpose and process to be followed in these presentations.

³⁰¹ Researcher journal STP1

Hence, in the second observed meeting, the children's worker made a relatively lengthy presentation, and then other staff members made comments or raised questions.³⁰² After some extended discussion, the lack of clarity about process was articulated by the curate, who said she was not sure whether this was what the children's worker wanted out of the session, and she raised a broader question about whether this was what they were meant to be doing. The children's worker responded quickly that he was looking for *any* feedback, comment or critique, so the comments were meeting a need for him. The curate replied by apologising and saying that she had not intended to be critical of him.

However, I would comment that the curate was raising an appropriate question about process. It was striking for me as a process-aware observer that at no point within the meeting did the vicar, who was chairing, give any directions or guidance on process or how the time was intended to be used for this agenda item.

The problem recurred at the next observed meeting, when the youth worker made a presentation about his work with the group for youth aged eleven to thirteen, and the difficulties he faced with it.³⁰³ There was some discussion about how to deal with one particularly problematic youth, on which several of the other staff made different suggestions. However, there was no sense of any outcomes being reached, nor of any steps that the youth worker might take to address the wider problems he had raised. Again my comment is that this related to a lack of clarity about process. The same problem was evident at the fourth meeting observed, when the curate made a presentation about her work with the group of people in their twenties and thirties, and at the sixth meeting observed when the administrator made a presentation about his building management responsibilities.³⁰⁴

It was not only this regular agenda item at All Saints that highlighted a lack of clarity about process. A regular pattern was for one team member to raise a problem they were facing, and for other members of the team to launch into generating ideas for solving the problem, without this having been invited, and without there being any process for evaluating the ideas.

³⁰² Researcher journal AS2

³⁰³ Researcher journal AS3

³⁰⁴ Researcher journals AS4 and AS6

One meeting where this happened on several occasions was the seventh observed meeting at All Saints.³⁰⁵ The youth worker began the substantive agenda by talking about his difficulties with the group of youth aged eleven to thirteen. The curate responded by offering a couple of solutions: doing a collaborative project with neighbouring churches; finding someone who was tired of a different area of ministry in the church to come and help with this group. The administrator continued the idea generation by suggesting using an intern who was based at home during a gap year between school and university. The minister in training made a different suggestion about interns, before the vicar then offered a view on the benefits of using a school leaver from All Saints who was known to them. However, none of the ideas was properly evaluated and no conclusion was reached.

Shortly afterwards, the project worker raised a concern about her ministry, saying that she wanted to leave a legacy of concern for the poor in the ministry of the churches in the local area. Then she added that she had a more immediate concern about finding someone to oversee the project while she was away on three weeks' holiday, and that she was unclear who should make the decision on this. The vicar suggested that she put the problem to the group of people who assisted her. Then the curate suggested that they might have a special Sunday to promote the work of the project. This was followed up by the minister in training who suggested that the project worker try to promote the idea of members of the church taking holiday time to assist with the project. The curate then made a further suggestion that the project worker try to network with people from other churches involved in similar types of social projects. None of the ideas were evaluated, and eventually the project worker, Diana, responded by saying: 'These are all options, I suppose. But there are no [easy] answers.'

In part the project worker seemed to be expressing some resistance to some of the ideas because of the extent of the challenges she was facing. However, I would comment that a significant problem was a lack of clarity over process. What was the project worker hoping for? Was she looking for the team to clarify where a decision could be made on holiday cover? Was she looking for suggestions for who might provide the cover? Was she seeking wider ideas about people who might help with the project, or who might provide some support for her? These

³⁰⁵ Researcher journal AS7

were all different questions which different members of the team tried to answer. A more productive path might have been opened up if the vicar, who was chairing the meeting, had asked one or two clarifying questions to establish what the project worker was hoping for; and had then made a proposal on how they might address her needs within the meeting.

In order for a meeting to work effectively, Doyle and Strauss say there is a need for a group addressing any issue to have clarity about their process, as well as the content of their discussion. As we have already noted, they assert that the ‘distinction between the content (the *what*: problem, topic or agenda) and the process (the *how*: approach, method or procedure) is a difficult but vitally important concept to grasp if you are going to understand why meetings don’t work well’.³⁰⁶ The lack of clarity about process was regularly evident in the staff meetings at All Saints, and more occasionally at St Peter’s. I consider that there is a particular responsibility for the person chairing the staff meeting, typically the incumbent, to establish clarity about process, about how an item will be considered or engaged with, and about how problem-solving and evaluation will be carried out. It is also the responsibility of team members to speak up when they are unclear about the process, and to press for clarity about the process of meeting. This then is also part of the shared task of exercising oversight in ministry which will be picked up in the next chapter on theological themes.

9. Focusing on One Item at a Time

In looking at how incumbents and ministry staff teams deal with their disagreements in their team meetings, and what use they made of some standard facilitation skills, it became evident that both case study teams faced the common problem (explained in the literature review in Chapter II) of staying focused on one item or issue at a time. Both teams faced the regular temptation of being diverted onto other issues than the one supposedly under consideration. This was an occasional problem for the St Peter’s team, but a fairly constant problem for the All Saints team.

³⁰⁶ Doyle and Strauss, *How to Make Meetings Work*, p.24

A simple example occurred in the second meeting observed at All Saints.³⁰⁷ The children's worker had been invited to make a presentation on what he was currently doing with the children's work. There then followed a discussion of various items that flowed out of his presentation, including the question of whether the children should be encouraged to exercise 'prayer ministry' with one another. After some discussion of this, the youth worker said that the conversation raised for him the question of whether they should be introducing everyone in the church to active prayer ministry. The vicar, who was chairing, and the rest of the group then ran with this and entered into a lengthy discussion of whether and how to approach encouraging every member of the congregation in prayer ministry. However, this discussion had nothing to do with the children's work and the issues being faced by the children's worker, which ostensibly was the agenda item under consideration.

I would comment therefore that it would have been more helpful for the vicar to have acknowledged that the issue of everyone in the church engaging in prayer ministry was an interesting one which they could come back to at another time (or even as the immediately subsequent item in the meeting, if appropriate); but to have called the group to maintain their focus on the youth work.

The sixth meeting observed at All Saints typified the problem of a lack of focus on a single issue at a time.³⁰⁸ The first main item on the agenda was a presentation from the administrator regarding a part of his job description which related to some responsibilities for the building. After the presentation, the youth worker launched in with a complaint about many outside groups having their own storage space in the building. The vicar responded by proposing that they should have a review of all the storage, having notified the different users. The minister in training then changed the tack, expressing unhappiness about the state of cleanliness of the church building, and asking how this was managed. This led into an extended discussion about cleaning and the different problems related to cleaning the building, with an attempt to clarify exactly what cleaning was done by whom. During the course of this the vicar made the observation that the church could benefit from having its own handyman, which started a short discussion of that idea.

The youth worker then changed the focus back to the administrator, and asked an open question about what he found most challenging in his building

³⁰⁷ Researcher journal AS2

³⁰⁸ Researcher journal AS6

management responsibilities. As the conversation continued, the youth worker then made a proposal that each congregation do a check before and after their use of the building to see if they spotted anything which had got broken or damaged. No one responded to the idea, and the vicar, who was chairing, did not ask for any evaluation of the proposal. Another member of the team then asked the administrator why he thought it was a problem having a certain individual as the current deputy churchwarden, to which the administrator offered a response. Then the vicar, who was chairing, thanked the administrator, and indicated that they would move onto the next item on the agenda, the above having ostensibly been one agenda item.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were several further instances during the remainder of this meeting where the discussion moved away from the stated item under consideration. For example, later there was a discussion about the rehearsal time and location for those involved in leading worship for the youth congregation, which the project worker interrupted by sharing a story of encouragement about someone who had recently been released from prison and how they had been positively affected by the informal adult evening service.

This pattern of shifting focus was observed in at least half of the team meetings at All Saints. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it therefore emerged that this was not a problem that the vicar and staff at All Saints were blind to. During interview, after the observation process, the vicar acknowledged:

We certainly identified that our discussions tend to be a bit rambling and to go off at a tangent, that would then go off on a subsequent tangent, and at a certain point we would say, 'How did we get to talking about this? What were we talking about?'

He then indicated that he saw having a printed agenda as important in trying to maintain focus on a particular issue.

However, I would comment that of greater significance than the written agenda is how the meeting is chaired or facilitated. The chair person has a primary responsibility to be watching over the discussion, and to bring it back onto the original focus when discussion strays onto a different issue.

There was a positive illustration of the chair person doing this in one of the early St Peter's meetings, which was chaired by the curate.³⁰⁹ The item that was

³⁰⁹ Researcher journal STP3

initially raised concerned the timing of the holiday clubs, which had arisen because of a change in timing of the Greenacres' holiday club, which the St Peter's children's worker had offered to help with. During the discussion the youth worker raised another activity which St Peter's were cooperating on with Greenacres, a neighbouring Evangelical church. The curate, who was chairing, intervened quickly and said that she would like to 'bracket that' and keep the focus on the issue of the holiday clubs. This ensured that the group did not get diverted onto another issue.

I would comment that had the curate not done so, it would also have been possible for another member of the team to speak up and say, 'That's a separate issue, which would be good to talk about another time. I would find it helpful if we could maintain our focus on the question of the holiday clubs at this point.' So we note that it does not need to be the sole responsibility of the chair person to keep the group focused on one issue: others in the group can also watch out for this.

As we have noted in the literature review above, in *How to Make Meetings Work*, Doyle and Strauss identify a lack of focus on a single issue at a time as one of the most common problems with meetings. They suggest that there is an inherent lack of focus in any group, and therefore they conclude that 'To work effectively, a group needs a single focus'.³¹⁰ Hence, as we have seen, Ron Kraybill identifies this as one of his top ten 'commandments' of meeting facilitation: 'Thou shalt centre thy discussion around one issue at a time; no other issue shalt thou consider.'³¹¹ This leads Kraybill to then assert that 'Constant vigilance by the facilitator is necessary to keep participants focused'. This discipline clearly ties in to the theological theme of exercising oversight in ministry, within the context of a group meeting: the incumbent and team members seeking to exercise oversight together will be continually keeping an eye out for whether they are maintaining focus, or wandering onto a new or different issue.

10. Addressing Underlying Concerns Beyond Initial Positions

The second main research question of this project asked what use incumbents and ministry staff teams make of some standard processes, tools and techniques for

³¹⁰ Doyle and Strauss, *How to Make Meetings Work*, p.22

³¹¹ Ron Kraybill, 'Ten Commandments of Meeting Facilitation', p.219

facilitating meetings and resolving conflicts within their team meetings. As we have noted above, one basic conflict resolution technique which the observation process sought to pick up was the practice of moving beyond the positions that people take to address their underlying concerns, as a way to resolve a presenting conflict.

There were several instances at St Peter's and All Saints where the incumbent or chair person only addressed the initial positions taken by members of the team, or else got stuck at these positions, and failed to explore the underlying concerns. In consequence, certain proposals were dismissed without exploring whether the underlying concern could helpfully have been engaged with, and alternative options generated; thus there were some disagreements that arose which were not addressed as productively as they might have been.

One striking example occurred in the fourth team meeting observed at St Peter's.³¹² After their usual preliminary items, the meeting moved to the agenda items that individual staff wanted to raise. The first person invited to raise an item was the senior associate vicar, Gary. He started by making a proposal that each staff person should include on their weekly time sheet some information about what they were doing on their day off and in their own social time, as a way to build up their understanding of one another, and to develop their sense of being a team. This idea had come out of listening to a presentation several of them had heard at conference earlier in the week. The children's worker responded first, indicating that he was not keen on the idea, as he often did little on his day off beyond sitting on the sofa. Gary said it would be fine to put that down. The curate made the point that some people might only be able to fill in their day-off plans after the event. The other associate minister, Harriet, said that she had a mixed response: at one level, she did not like the idea because she wanted to retain some private space; on the other hand it might increase the sense of accountability to one another. Gary replied that he was not motivated by wanting to increase accountability, more by wanting to build the sense of team, and that it would be fine to put down something like 'private space' for time one did not want to have to account for.

The vicar, Matthew, then responded. He began by saying that he thought the weekly time sheets were 'a vague myth' as they did not give enough detail about how staff used their time. He said the purpose of the time sheets was so

³¹² Researcher journal STP4

that the office knew and could confirm what appointments had been scheduled by all team members, which meant they needed to be more specific, indicating who individual meetings were with. He said that his preference was to use their Monday morning coffee time as the way to catch up with one another, and that he would not find it helpful to have to put down in advance what he was going to do on his day off, and would rather see this type of sharing emerge organically, rather than taking such a prescriptive form. He also thought it important to avoid the idea that could sometimes prevail in church staff teams that the vicar and the team members needed to be 'best friends'. At this point it seemed clear, as an observer, that the idea was about to be killed off and that the vicar's preference would determine the outcome. This is indeed what happened.

In commenting on this incident, what struck me was that there was no attempt to see whether the essential underlying concern needed to be addressed through another means. The concern was about how well they knew one another and how to strengthen their relationships as a group. There was a legitimate question about whether the informal sharing in the coffee shop at 10.00 a.m. on Mondays was sufficient as the main mechanism for getting to know one another, which seemed to be the vicar's view.

In analysing and commenting on the incident, it seemed that one of the difficulties was with the way that the associate vicar, Gary, had raised his concern, which was by making a particular proposal. It would probably have been more fruitful if he had raised the nature of his concern – about the quality of team relationships – and then asked team members for their ideas about how to address it, giving his proposal as one possible option. At the same time, one might see it as the responsibility of the chair person, in this case the incumbent, to have sought to draw out and engage with the underlying concern. So as the chair, the vicar could potentially have said:

Gary seems to be expressing a concern about how well we know one another, and a desire for us to find a way to strengthen our relationships. I see our informal coffee times on Monday mornings as a key opportunity for us to get to know one another and to build our relationships. However, I wonder if others see a need for more than this, and what ideas you might have to address the concern that Gary has raised? We could then look to evaluate the various ideas that are offered, including Gary's idea that we provide more information on our time sheets about how we are using our free time.

Such an approach would have offered a way of working with the underlying concern, while not getting stuck on the positional proposal that Gary had made initially.

The next (fifth) staff meeting observed at St Peter's provided a second example.³¹³ It related to another proposal by the associate vicar, Gary, this time regarding the prayer challenge discussed above (see page 96). Gary explained that he wanted to check that staff members were meeting the challenge, because he thought that as staff members they should be setting an example to the congregation. The children's worker responded positively, but the vicar then firmly intervened, saying that he did not want to put people on the spot over this and, after a humorous riposte, Gary dropped the issue.

However, my commentary is that Gary was expressing an important underlying concern about leading by example on something which they as leaders had called church members to commit to doing. This underlying concern was not picked up on or addressed. Even if he did not want to run with the particular proposal Gary had made, the vicar could have helpfully acknowledged or affirmed the essential concern. He might then have sought responses from the group on how they followed up on challenges that were set for church members, and how they could appropriately monitor their individual fulfilment of such challenges. This would have modelled moving beyond the position and addressing the underlying concern; and by doing so, could have enabled some growth within the team.

A couple of examples from the All Saints team meetings will further illustrate the point. At the first staff meeting observed at All Saints, early in the meeting as part of a review of the previous Sunday's services, Tracy, the minister in training, said that at the staff meeting two or three weeks previously they had agreed that the worship leader would sit close to the band leader, rather than on the opposite side of the church, in order to enhance communication.³¹⁴ However, she observed that since then nothing seemed to have happened to implement their decision. The vicar, Patrick, spoke first and affirmed that such a move would indeed help matters. However, the curate, Sue, then chipped in with a different view, and said that she considered that one could communicate adequately with the band leader if one knew the person involved and they knew what you were doing as the worship leader.

³¹³ Researcher journal STP5

³¹⁴ Researcher journal AS1

Tracy responded that it would still be much easier to communicate if the two sat closer together. Sue, the curate, persisted with her resistance by saying that the newly proposed arrangement should not be made into a rule, providing good communication happened between the worship and band leaders.

The two women were starting to get entrenched in their respective positions. It appeared that the administrator, Monty, who was chairing the meeting did not know where to go with this, as he then spoke up and said that this concluded the review of the morning service and they needed to move on to consider other matters. He simply closed down the discussion, without bringing any resolution to what was a clear disagreement.

In commenting on this incident, my impression was that the administrator's closing down of the discussion may have come from an uncertainty about how to address what looked like a positional impasse. Had he understood the need to engage with the underlying concerns, and had he wanted to do so, then he might have said something like:

It is clear that there is a difference between Tracy and Sue about whether we should be implementing the decision we took a couple of weeks ago regarding where the worship and band leaders sit. From what I have heard, it seems that Tracy is concerned to ensure that we maximise the chance of good communication between the worship and band leaders, while Sue is concerned to retain flexibility about where the worship leader sits. Are there other concerns that need to be taken into account on this issue? And what thoughts do any of us have on how to ensure the different concerns can best be met?

Such an approach would have opened up the possibility of resolving the issue, and would have been more productive than ignoring and not addressing the disagreement.

A similar instance of getting stuck on positions occurred at the eighth meeting observed at All Saints.³¹⁵ The team were reviewing previous action points, one of which related to action that the children's worker, Derek, was meant to be taking in relation to Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks, and its successor, the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA), which it was explained was coming into being later in the year. Patrick, the vicar, entered into an exchange with Derek which became an argument about interpreting the new CRB/ISA regulations and their application. Derek sought to explain how he understood the regulations would

³¹⁵ Researcher journal AS8

be working from July that year, as explained to him at a recent conference. Patrick contradicted Derek, in part on the basis of what he (Patrick) thought was practicable and realistic in terms of implementation. Both adopted an authoritative tone, with the implication that they knew what they were talking about and they were the one who was correct. They started talking over one another and not listening to one another.

The curate then chipped in with a comment, as did the youth worker; neither of these helped matters. The discussion shifted to focus on how the new arrangements would work in relation to the crèche during Sunday services, with a question about whether parents who were regular visitors to the crèche would have either to be CRB/ISA checked, or else refused admittance. The churchwarden, Lynne, then spoke up and said that she could not possibly refuse a parent admittance in this way, and that such an approach was unworkable. The discussion then shifted back to a ping pong – with some rising heat – between the vicar (supported by the churchwarden), on the one side, and the children’s worker on the other. The latter was intent on trying to ensure a correct representation of what he understood to be the new official policy and its constraints. The administrator and the project worker kept silent and seemed disengaged – and the youth worker then started checking his mobile phone, which seemed a sign that he had also disengaged. In the end the vicar closed the discussion down by directing that the children’s worker, Derek, needed to get the minister in training, Tracy, and all her volunteers CRB/ISA checked as well as all the crèche volunteers; and he then moved onto the next item.

My commentary is that the vicar omitted to clarify the nature of the disagreement or how it would be addressed in future; and the group was left with a rather unhappy mood prevailing in the meeting at that point, which was not acknowledged. Further, had the vicar understood the benefit of engaging with the underlying concerns, then he might have said something like:

I can see that, as the children’s worker, you are concerned to ensure that we meet the new legal requirements. My own concern is that we end up with an arrangement that is workable for us as a church. I think it would be helpful for us to gather some more information on what the new requirements entail, and then explore how we might be able to get them to work in our context. We might also seek advice from one of the diocesan officers, since this is clearly going to affect all churches in the diocese. What other thoughts do any of you have on what is needed to take this forward at this stage?

I would suggest that such an approach could have left the team feeling in a more positive place at the end of this extended discussion, without ducking the disagreement that had arisen.

There was also one positive example of moving beyond initial positions, which was witnessed at the tenth meeting observed at All Saints.³¹⁶ The agenda item under discussion was the church's 'weekend away', which was going to be held at home in their own church building. Various things were raised for discussion, but the contentious item related to the folding tables owned by the church. The project worker, Diana, raised a question about whether she would have the use of all the tables that she needed for the soup kitchen that would be run as normal on the Saturday. The administrator, Monty, explained that the church would need the two tables belonging to the church that Diana usually used, and so she would only have the one table that belonged to the homelessness project. Monty blamed someone else involved in overseeing the homelessness project (not part of the staff team) for having procrastinated for a long time about purchasing tables needed for the project. Diana expressed her unhappiness in a sarcastic way, and indicated that she would be really stuck without the two extra tables they normally used. Monty was unyielding, and said that Diana would have to find another church in the area to lend her some tables. The two of them seemed stuck.

However, the vicar, who was chairing the meeting, did not back off from the disagreement. Instead he worked with it and sought some further information. He asked Diana when exactly she would need the tables and established that she would only need them between 3.00 and 5.00 p.m. He then established from Monty that the church would not need its tables before 5.30 p.m. The curate, Sue, then helpfully suggested that a small team from the young adults group could collect the tables from downstairs, where the soup kitchen would be run, at 5.00 p.m. and could then set up the tables in the hall upstairs in time for the church to use them at 5.30 p.m. After getting agreement to some further parameters that the administrator wanted to be satisfied about, the vicar enabled them to find a constructive way forward that ensured that both the project worker and the church would have the tables that they needed, without any loss of face or giving-in by either side, and in a

³¹⁶ Researcher journal AS10

way that did not involve anyone having to do extra work in trying to borrow tables from elsewhere.

I would comment that this outcome, which addressed the key concerns of both sides, contributed to the meeting being one of the most engaging and creative meetings that I observed at All Saints. (Another contributory factor that helped to make this a good meeting was how the vicar picked up on some of my feedback about summarising at some key points in discussions.)

As we have noted in the literature review above, back in 1981 Fisher and Ury identified the importance of distinguishing between the positions that people take and the need to address their underlying concerns as a key element of finding a constructive way forward with a negotiation or the resolution of a conflict.³¹⁷ However, as we have already noted, this relatively basic concept is still not widely understood among British church leaders, despite being picked up by British authors.³¹⁸ It was therefore perhaps not too surprising to encounter several instances at St Peter's and All Saints where the incumbent or chair person only addressed the initial positions, or got stuck on them, and failed to explore the underlying concerns.

Addressing underlying concerns links to the theological theme of working out what it means to be the body of Christ, which will be explored in Chapter V, because it proceeds from the assumption that everyone has concerns which may be valid and which the group should seek to address, rather than assuming that one position must win out over another position. In addition, successful work at addressing underlying concerns can be an example of peacemaking and achieving reconciliation. The task of facilitating this work, as the chair of the meeting, links to the practice of oversight.

11. Summarising Discussions and Conclusions

We have noted that this project has a focus on the use that incumbents and ministry staff teams make of some standard processes, tools and techniques for facilitating meetings, and in the literature review above we have noted that a key facilitation tool, especially for the chair person or group facilitator, is the use of summary and

³¹⁷ Fisher and Ury, *Getting to Yes*. See also Carolyn Schrock-Shenk (ed.), *Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual: Foundation Skills for Constructive Conflict Transformation* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Conciliation Service, 2000⁴), pp.160 & 181-2

³¹⁸ Nash et al., *Skills for Collaborative Ministry*, pp.115-117

paraphrasing. Hence recording of the use of this tool formed one of the items within the observation schedule, in Appendix 7.

In the observation of the All Saints staff meetings, a pattern which emerged as characteristic was the marked absence or lack of summarising by the chair person. The first meeting observed at All Saints was chaired initially by the administrator who left midway through the meeting.³¹⁹ He then handed over chairing to the curate, who ended up handling most of the issues where there was some disagreement. The discussion drifted in many different directions and lacked focus. What was striking was how little the curate either summarised individual views, the range of views or where the group had got to with the discussion. This seemed a major contributor to the lack of focus in the group. A similar pattern recurred on several occasions at All Saints, whose staff meetings were thereafter all chaired by the vicar, Patrick.

In the third meeting observed, the youth worker raised some concerns which the vicar and the administrator both struggled to understand.³²⁰ After some exchanges between the three of them, the project worker, Diana, made a rare contribution, and tried to summarise what the youth worker had said, to see if he was satisfied that he had been understood. It was notable that the vicar, who was chairing, had not tried to check his understanding of what the youth worker had said, through a brief summary, despite the evident need for clarification.

At the fourth observation at All Saints, the first substantive item was a presentation from the curate about her work with people in their twenties and thirties.³²¹ This agenda item was part of a new pattern in their staff meetings of focusing on an aspect of one team member's ministry at the outset of each meeting. The curate, Sue, spoke at some length, and then there were a series of questions and observations about different aspects. Then at the end, Patrick, the vicar simply drew the discussion to a close by saying, 'Thank you for that', but without offering any summary of the key things that Sue had shared, or of the items for which she had requested prayer.

³¹⁹ Researcher journal AS1

³²⁰ Researcher journal AS3

³²¹ Researcher journal AS4

There was a similar occurrence a month later, at the sixth meeting that was observed at All Saints.³²² This time the administrator, Monty, made a presentation about the dimensions and issues of managing the church's buildings, which included a carefully prepared visual handout. There followed an extended interchange with several of the other team members over a number of issues relating to the management of the buildings. At the end, the vicar, Patrick, simply closed the item with, 'Good. Thank you.' There was nothing more, including no summary of anything that Monty had shared.

Moving to some preliminary analysis and commentary, the impact of not offering any summary was that there was no real recognition of what had been shared by either team member, which a summary would have provided. Instead, the vicar's attempt at an affirmatory comment seemed empty, because it contained nothing specific to tie it to what had been shared. In both instances, a brief summary by the vicar would have provided affirmation of the team member who had made a good presentation and, in the case of the administrator, had worked up a helpful diagram to illustrate it.

In the sixth observed meeting, the vicar raised an issue about people being very late for the morning service, which did not get going until ten to fifteen minutes after the scheduled start time.³²³ The youth worker, Tristan, responded to the concern by proposing that they move the socialising time over coffee prior to the start of the service. The vicar, Patrick, resisted this, evaluating immediately, on the basis that this would actually make the problem worse, because they would not be able to get people through into the main sanctuary on time as they would be too engaged chatting with one another. Tristan responded that this could be simply resolved, and they could trial the approach during Lent on an experimental basis. The vicar responded with, 'Excellent. OK', and then moved onto the next item.

Commenting on this incident, what struck me as an observer was that the vicar did not canvass opinions from anyone else on the staff, he did not engage in any process of problem-solving Tristan's proposal, and he did not summarise any aspect of the exchange. Instead it appeared that, because he did not think the idea was a good one, he avoided engaging with it and cut off any further discussion – under the cloak of an affirmative comment – by moving onto the next item. The

³²² Researcher journal AS6

³²³ Researcher journal AS6

vicar may have been making a good judgement about the relative value of the youth worker's proposal. However, I am raising some doubts about the way that he approached it – about the process that he used.

Again at the sixth observed meeting, one of the next items on the team's agenda concerned a meeting to review the worship services that had happened the previous week.³²⁴ There were a number of ideas and comments from some of the staff, but the vicar wrapped up discussion by simply saying: 'Excellent. Brilliant.' However, my commentary is that there was no clarity about what was excellent or brilliant and, because the vicar offered no summary, it was unclear what if anything had been agreed or what conclusion had been arrived at.

The final item at the same meeting was a lengthy discussion about possible uses of a pot of £20,000 that had been set aside by the PCC for use on special projects.³²⁵ A significant part of the discussion involved the vicar trying to help one or two of the staff understand the difference between the funding of ongoing running costs, such as additional staff, and the funding of one-off expenses, which was what the pot was intended for. One of the staff, the minister in training, struggled to accept this, and thought that there was a strong argument for the funds being used for extra staff for the outreach project that she headed up, and that the restrictions being put on the use of the money were 'dotty'. The vicar, Patrick, concluded the discussion by saying that he 'flagged that up' (although what that meant was unclear – possibly it meant that he took note of that view), then he finished the discussion and concluded the meeting by simply saying, 'Good. Let's pray', and then went ahead and prayed.

In terms of commentary, I would start by noting that this was a substantial item that had generated a lengthy discussion with a lot of heat. It would have been a fruitful discussion *if* the vicar had summarised the range of views, the nature of the concerns raised in the discussion, and whether any action was going to be taken. As all of these elements were missing, the potential benefit of the discussion seemed to have been lost.

At the following observed meeting, my seventh, the project worker, Diana, explained that, when she finished her current role, one thing she wanted to

³²⁴ Researcher journal AS6

³²⁵ Researcher journal AS6

leave with the local churches was a legacy of concern for the poor.³²⁶ She then raised a specific concern about finding a responsible person to oversee the work while she was away for three weeks on holiday. The vicar suggested putting this concern to the team of people who assisted her with the project. The curate took the discussion down a different track, and wondered about having a special Sunday to raise the profile of the project and to challenge the church to remember the poor. The minister in training suggested encouraging people to take some holiday time to serve with the project. The curate suggested that there was a need for Diana to network with other workers involved in similar ministries. And a range of other ideas came tumbling forth, including identifying two local trusts from which to seek funding for the project. The vicar then drew this extended discussion to a close by saying, 'We need to move on', but did not offer any summary of what had been covered, of the key concerns that had been raised, or of any action that might be taken to follow up on the discussion. As a result of the lack of summarising, these elements were all lost.

One further example, from my eighth observation, will suffice to illustrate this repeated pattern in the All Saints' team meeting.³²⁷ The first item on the agenda was an opportunity for Tracy, the minister in training, to report on the areas of ministry that she was leading, and to set out some of the challenges that she was currently facing. She explained some of what she was doing with the café and activities that were run twice a week for parents with pre-school children. This was a sizeable project, which typically had about 70 adults and 90 children attending. Tracy said that she saw a pressing need to employ someone to work in the café, as they could not find anyone to take this on voluntarily; and she expressed a concern that so few of the families participating in the project actually came from the All Saints' congregation. The youth worker suggested specifically recruiting some families from All Saints to attend, and also suggested establishing a membership scheme to try to control, or at least keep track of, who was involved.

The churchwarden, Lynne (who, unusually, was attending this meeting) then took the discussion on a completely different tack, and suggested getting the parents at All Saints involved in a project to help mothers with the process of going back to work after having a child. The vicar then wondered about how to release the

³²⁶ Researcher journal AS7

³²⁷ Researcher journal AS8

evangelistic potential of parents involved in the current project. The churchwarden said that she was pushing Tracy, the minister in training, to see that there were opportunities to reach out to new families; while the children's worker, Derek, commented that another existing project that he ran was the key mechanism for reaching those families that the churchwarden was describing. Tristan, the youth worker, wondered whether the current café project could be extended to Sunday morning in some way, which Tracy indicated she was not keen on. And there were a range of other contributions and comments, with different ideas and problem-solving suggestions. Patrick, the vicar, rounded off the discussion by saying: 'That has been a good discussion, with some good thinking outside the box.'

In commenting on what happened here, I note that the vicar was seeking to be affirming at the end. However, his conclusion failed to capture what specifically had been good about the discussion, what new ideas had been generated, or to establish what – if anything – had been of value to Tracy, or how any action would be taken forward. From a process perspective, it might have been more accurate and honest for the vicar to have said:

This has been a chaotic discussion that has wandered far off course from the stated agenda of hearing from Tracy and learning more about the issues that she is facing. There has been some interesting although uninvited brainstorming and problem-solving, but potentially none of it has been genuinely helpful to Tracy or has met the concerns that she wants to see addressed.

(While it is perhaps unlikely that he would have been this frank, it would have been a more accurate and probably more helpful summary.) What would certainly have been more helpful would have been if he had simply reviewed the ground that had been covered and the ideas that had been offered, and asked Tracy how she might want to take any of these forward.

It is perhaps worth noting at this point that the lack of summarisation may have been symptomatic of a general lack of clarity about outcomes in the All Saints team meetings. This was certainly one of the frustrations for the administrator at All Saints, who in interview commented that their agenda items 'often don't have a clear cut decision or answer at the end of them' and reiterated this when talking about what could be improved: 'I'd like us to be even clearer as to what we're trying to get out of any particular discussion or agenda item so that we know what we're trying to do.'

There were a few positive examples of summarising being used in the team meetings observed at St Peter's. So at the first meeting observed at St Peter's there was some discussion around how the staff worked as a team, and there was a sense that this needed a more extended exploration.³²⁸ Before they moved onto a new item, of the associate vicars, Gary, sought to clarify what had been agreed in the discussion, and summarised that they would discuss the issue of how they worked as a team at their next away day, which the vicar, Matthew, confirmed. This helped to ensure that the issue was not lost.

At the third meeting observed at St Peter's there was some disagreement about what information to include on their Christmas services card.³²⁹ The associate vicar, Gary, made a proposal about how to take the issue forward. Judy, the curate, who was chairing, checked whether the other associate vicar, Harriet, was happy with the proposal. There was some further discussion, and then the senior administrator, Martha, took the initiative to summarise where the discussion had got to (partly it seemed in the absence of Judy summarising). Judy then made a final proposal on what would be included on the Christmas services card which ensured that everyone was clear about the conclusion.

In the final meeting observed at St Peter's there was an item where they conducted some review of the staff team meeting.³³⁰ Somewhat as usual, there was a lack of clarity about process, about how the discussion was going to be held, and how a way forward was going to be discerned. However, what was strong was the vicar, Matthew, summarising the range of concerns expressed, and capturing these succinctly. This ensured that all of the staff members could feel that their views had been heard.

Let us broaden out the analysis and commentary. We have already noted, in the literature review, Catherine Widdicombe's insight – as an experienced group facilitator – that 'Making a summary of a discussion ... can be of enormous benefit in a group'.³³¹ She spells out a number of the benefits of summarising, including helping members re-focus on the topic, getting everyone to the same level of understanding, highlighting the main points or key issues, and moving the discussion to the next stage. We noted that other benefits include clarifying the

³²⁸ Researcher journal STP1

³²⁹ Researcher journal STP3

³³⁰ Researcher journal STP14

³³¹ Widdicombe, *Meetings that Work*, p.111

nature of any disagreement, encapsulating the range of views expressed on the issue under discussion, and clarifying what follow-up action is going to be taken. However, although this tool has enormous and varied benefits, we have also noted that summarising is ‘a complex activity’ and a skill that needs intentional development and practice.³³²

As the above examples from All Saints illustrate, without summarisation, it is possible that plenty of potentially helpful ideas are generated, but no conclusion is reached, and there is no sense of how the issue might move forward or what is going to be done with any new ideas.

We can therefore assert that the chair person of a staff team meeting has a critical role at the end of a discussion in summarising the range of views expressed, including the nature of any disagreement, any emerging consensus or wisdom, and what is going to happen next as a result of the discussion. (On what is going to happen next, there does not have to be a specific action point. There is a range of possibilities, including (i) that person or group X is going to take action Y; (ii) that no one is going to take any action, but that the group is going to revisit it as an agenda item at the next staff meeting or the next staff away day in order to plan a way forward; or (iii) that the group will note the discussion, but not do anything further at this point, until someone raises it again for consideration at a future meeting.)

Further, the approach taken by the vicar of All Saints suggests that if the chair person wants to offer affirmation at the end of a discussion, it is important for such affirmation to be specific in order for it to be meaningful.

The positive illustrations from St Peter’s also highlight that other members of the team can take the initiative to provide a summary, if there is a lack of clarity or discussion has ranged extensively, and the responsibility does not need to lie exclusively with the person chairing the meeting.

The task and role of summarising in a staff meeting fits centrally with the practice of oversight, one of the theological strands that will be picked up in the next chapter. Such oversight is a central task of the person chairing the meeting, whether that be the incumbent or another team member, and will probably require some developed skills; however the task is one shared with the rest of the team, and

³³² Widdicombe, *Meetings that Work*, p.111

any team member can provide a summary as part of watching over the team meeting. Where there is an expressed disagreement, then summarising can be the first step in the work of reconciliation, another theological strand.

12. Testing for Agreement or Consensus

In exploring how disagreement is handled, there has been a focus in this project on the use that incumbents and ministry staff teams make of some standard processes, tools and techniques for facilitating meetings. As we noted in the literature review above, one potentially helpful facilitation tool is that of testing for agreement or consensus before finalising a proposal. Otherwise it can be tempting for the chair of a meeting to assume that participants in the meeting are on board with a proposal or stated conclusion unless they speak out to express dissent. Hence the observation process sought to identify whether the chair person tested for agreement or consensus, and this was one of the items within the observation schedule, in Appendix 7.

As it turned out, there were several occasions at both St Peter's and All Saints when the chair person seemed to assume that other members of the staff team supported a proposal or conclusion, without checking that this was indeed the case. This will be illustrated in the examples reported on below.

At the first St Peter's meeting observed, in the context of a review of the previous Sunday's services, one of the associate vicars, Harriet, made a proposal that there should be prayer for healing offered at every communion service.³³³ The vicar affirmed this proposal himself, but did not check whether others supported it; instead he seemed to assume consent, because he gave no space for anyone else to express any reservations with the proposal. Later in the same meeting (during a discussion set out in detail above, see page 92), the vicar announced that they would attend a particular conference together as a staff team every other year, but without checking whether there was support for this or not among his colleagues. I would comment that given that they would all be expected to attend, it would have been appropriate to at least check whether the rest of the staff team were supportive or had any

³³³ Researcher journal STP1

concerns. Instead, the approach that was taken left the impression that the vicar did not want to hear any concerns about his decision, as I observed it.

At my sixth St Peter's meeting, after some discussion I made a proposal that the secretary Rachel should not be included in the administration of the style profile instrument.³³⁴ The vicar accepted my proposal on behalf of the group without checking whether anyone had any reservations – although earlier two team members had spoken up in favour of including Rachel. In terms of commentary, as explained above (see page 97), my reading of this was that the vicar was glad to accept my proposal because it served to avoid the conflict being developed. However, given the indication of different views, it could have been more appropriate for the vicar to ask what concerns, if any, others had with the proposal. This would have enabled the vicar to establish whether there was a valid counter argument that needed to be considered.

The tenth meeting observed at St Peter's was one of those chaired by the senior associate vicar, in the vicar's absence due to his health situation.³³⁵ When invited to offer any agenda items, the pastoral worker proposed that elderly people in the church should take on greater responsibility for their own travel to church, and that as a staff team they should decide to end any arrangement of the church centrally organising lifts for the elderly people. One or two other team members spoke up to support this proposal. The associate vicar seemed to assume that this represented a consensus, and did not check whether any of those who had not yet spoken held a different view or had any reservations about the proposal. I would comment that there might have been a valid argument to consider against the proposal, for example based on an understanding of the church's functioning as the body of Christ, but because the consensus was never tested such a view was not given a chance to be voiced.

There were few occasions when the lack of testing for consensus was as evident in the All Saints' team meetings as it was in the St Peter's ones. However, there was one notable occasion which stood out at All Saints, at my twelfth observation.³³⁶ In the heart of the meeting, as part of their discussion of the purpose of staff team meetings, the vicar made a proposal that they consider all taking turns

³³⁴ Researcher journal STP6

³³⁵ Researcher journal STP10

³³⁶ Researcher journal AS12

chairing the staff team meeting. He said that this would be good for each person for their own personal development. He also said that it would help them to take corporate responsibility for moving the meeting forward, on the basis that when you chair the meeting you have to think about process, and this would prompt them all to be more conscious of process. He asked how everyone felt about this proposal, and whether everyone was happy to take a turn chairing.

The curate spoke up with some kind of affirmation, but no one else spoke up or gave any positive assent. The vicar seemed to take silence to mean assent. Instead of waiting for others to respond, after the curate had spoken the vicar made a few additional comments: that he wanted someone else to take notes when the administrator was chairing the meeting, and that it would be fine to ask someone else to take the chair when there was an item that you wanted to advocate for (and thus would struggle to be impartial about). He then said, 'Is that OK?' but really did not give time for any negative responses, and then immediately moved on to implementing the proposal by saying, 'Now we need to come up with a rota or something'.

Commenting on this, it seemed to me as an observer that the vicar was determined to move ahead with his proposal, and was not keen to hear any reservations. However, it also seemed unwise to assume the consent of those who had not spoken – which was most of the team – as it was potentially a challenging request to have everyone take turns at chairing the meeting. Further, some team members were likely to be more gifted at and comfortable with the chairing role than others. Testing for consensus could have allowed team members to express their concerns. It could also have established whether they were genuinely giving their consent or simply accommodating the vicar because they felt they had no option. If the latter, this could have forewarned the vicar that his plan might encounter some difficulties when implemented.

As we have already noted, whoever is chairing a meeting 'should remember that silence does not mean consent'.³³⁷ We have seen from the above examples that it can be easy or tempting for the chair of a meeting to forget this. To overcome the assumption, it can therefore be beneficial to use a straw poll or straw vote of some kind to test the level of consensus. In a small group such as a church

³³⁷ Shearouse, 'Straw Poll: Testing for Consensus'

staff team of seven or eight people, as at St Peter's and All Saints, it may be enough for the chair person simply to check whether everyone is on board with the conclusion or decision that has been reached, or – probably better – to ask whether anyone has any reservations about the direction proposed. This was not an approach used by the chairs of the staff meetings at either St Peter's or All Saints. However, as we have seen, there were a number of occasions when a testing of consensus could have been either helpful, appropriate or important.

Having said that, it is worth affirming that it was usual for the vicar of St Peter's to give each staff person one opportunity to comment on particular proposals or ideas, through a simple 'round robin' process of going around the table one by one. When this approach was taken it made a significant step in exploring the range of views within the group, and in ensuring everyone's participation. The approach could have been enhanced by checking whether anyone had changed their view in the light of others' comments; or by checking for reservations when a proposal was made following a round robin of views.

The process of testing for consensus relates to the theological strand of the practice of oversight. It is a key responsibility for the person chairing the meeting, but is also something that anyone in the group could take some responsibility for noticing. For example, a team member might say, 'I'm not sure whether everyone is on board with this', or 'Several team members have been silent so far: I wonder if there are any reservations about the direction this is moving in that would be good for us to hear.' Testing for consensus may also relate to the work of peacemaking, as it is a way of checking whether group members are 'at peace' regarding a particular proposal.

13. Conclusion

One of the assumptions at the outset of the project was that incumbents of large churches, and members of their staff teams, were likely to make regular use of some standard tools and techniques for facilitating meetings and resolving conflicts within their team meetings. This assumption was partly based on the expectation that those who lead large churches are likely to have been appointed to that role because they have a strong skill base. While they may indeed have a strong skill base, the evidence of this research projects suggests that those skills do not necessarily lie in

facilitating meetings and working with disagreement and conflict. It proved a surprise how little some standard tools and techniques for facilitating meetings were used by the incumbents and team members in the two case studies observed. For example the skill of summarising, which has numerous benefits and which Bridge Builders teaches as a basic facilitation tool, was little used by either of the incumbents when they were facilitating their staff meetings.

In terms of the outcomes of the disagreements within these team meetings, it was striking that the most frequent outcome in both teams (nearly half of the time at St Peter's, and over a third of the time at All Saints) was no resolution. We might reasonably conclude that one reason for this was the lack of use of some standard facilitation and conflict resolution tools, and that if such had been regularly practised that it is more likely that a resolution would have been reached within the team meetings. In the case of at least a quarter of the disagreements, the outcome was one that was determined by the vicar, rather than being a negotiated outcome by the team working as a group. It is hard to say whether this would have been any different if facilitation tools and conflict resolution processes had been better and more extensively used. The incumbent's relative power within the group and his desire to see particular outcomes on certain issues could well be more determinative than the process used, no matter how well facilitated.

The high incidence of a lack of resolution of disagreements within the St Peter's team would also seem to be strongly linked to the attitude shown towards the expression and engagement with disagreement. There was a clear pattern – one might say even a culture – of conflict avoidance and a discouragement of the open expression of disagreement shown by both the incumbent and other team members. This meant that there was an unwillingness to put time and effort into addressing disagreements when they arose, and thus unsurprising that such disagreements were so often left unresolved within the team meeting.

Another assumption at the outset of the project was that if every-day, low-level disagreement is handled well by an incumbent and the rest of the staff team, then this will help to prevent tensions escalating to more intense and less manageable levels of conflict. This particular research project did not produce evidence that could either affirm or contradict this assumption. So it is hard to know whether the culture of conflict avoidance may have disabled the incumbent and staff

when it came to addressing a more escalated conflict either among them as a group, or in the wider parish.

What was clear from this research was that both the incumbents and the members of their team had plenty of scope to develop better meeting facilitation and participation skills and to use more creative and productive processes for working with disagreement and conflict.

V. Theological Reflection

1. Introduction

This chapter will address the two remaining research questions. First, to what extent, if any, do staff team members view their engagement with disagreement, differences and tension as a task of Christian discipleship with theological implications? And, second, what wider theological reflections offer a framework within which to place and interpret the findings of the field research and to view conflict in the life of the church? In terms of the movement of the pastoral cycle, this chapter represents a move into the third stage of the cycle, to a theological reflection and a bringing to bear of the wider Christian tradition. There are two different steps to this movement within the chapter. The first step is an exploration of the understanding of some of the research subjects' theological perspective on engaging with disagreement and conflict. This was explored through the interviews with three members of each of the case study teams. (See pages 64 to 66, for details of the interview process.) This is followed by some critical analysis of team members' theological reflections. This first step is incorporated into this chapter as it represents a step beyond observing how the staff teams handled things in practice, to having them begin to engage in the process of theological reflection, which fits with the third stage of the pastoral cycle. The second step is an attempt to set out the researcher's own insights from the Christian tradition as a normative corrective to some of what was observed through the field research and what was offered by the team members in the interviews.

2. Theological Reflection by Staff Team Members

Graham, Walton and Ward propose that there are three primary tasks of theological reflection: the induction and nurture of members (e.g. what it means to be a Christian), the building and sustaining of the community of faith (e.g. what it means to be the 'body of Christ' in a particular place and time), and communication of the faith to a wider culture (e.g. what it means to preach 'good news').³³⁸ Given the

³³⁸ Graham et al., *Theological Reflection: Methods*, pp.10-11

focus of this research project, we might expect that the theological reflections offered by members of the two staff teams would focus on the second of these tasks: what it means to be the community of faith, and how that is built and sustained. Broadly speaking, this proved to be the case.

In seeking to elicit some theological reflections of the staff team members that were interviewed, two different approaches were taken within the interview. (See Appendix 12 for the detailed interview schedule.) First was a direct, open question: ‘What do you think God might want for you as a staff team when it comes to dealing with disagreement and low-level conflict in team meetings?’³³⁹ Second, the interviewer offered a sheet with three different statements expressing ways that one might view dealing with disagreement and low-level conflict in the Christian community. Each interviewee was then asked which of the statements best reflected their own view, and was then invited to explain why that was the case.

It seems worth comparing the responses from the members in the two different teams. The three interviewed from St Peter’s were the vicar, Matthew, the female associate vicar, Harriet, and the senior administrator, Martha. Most striking is that all three independently started at a similar place and expressed a concern about unity. The vicar, Matthew, drawing on a couple of biblical references, began: ‘if you pick up on Ephesians 4 or 1 Corinthians 12, there’s both a sense of unity but also diversity. So I think there needs to be space within a team, for folk to come with different gifts and reflections.’ He then continued a little later: ‘folk need to have that freedom to express their diversity and to disagree with one another, but to hold with the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.’ (He did not unpack what he understood by this last phrase, which is a direct reference to Ephesians 4:3 but is not obvious in its meaning.)

The female associate vicar, Harriet, began at a similar place with a focus on unity, while highlighting how challenging she saw this: ‘I think God wants us to work in unity, but we’re not all the same. So I think there will be some sort of level of disagreement without it slipping into conflict, and how to have that is very, very hard.’ The senior administrator, Martha, sounded a similar note: ‘Very much [what God wants is] that we need to work together because we are his body, and I think everybody you would speak to in the team really feels called here by God at this

³³⁹ See Appendix 12: Interview Schedule.

time.’ So in thinking about what God wanted for them as a staff team in dealing with disagreement, all three expressed a concern about maintaining unity and working together as a body given their diversity as a group. Two of them explicitly drew on the Pauline image of the church as the body of Christ, made up of diverse people fulfilling different roles and bringing different gifts and contributions.

Although all three staff from St Peter’s started in a similar place, they then took their reflections in different directions. Having stated the need for staff team members to express their diversity and to disagree with one another, Matthew, the vicar then qualified this by saying that the space for this must be constrained by the need to get through the business of a team meeting:

hopefully they’ve not gone out [from team meetings] thinking, ‘I’ve not been listened to, I’ve not had an opportunity to express what I’m thinking.’ I mean that may well happen from time to time that folk feel, ‘I could’ve done with a bit longer to express myself’ or ‘I was cut off’, because particularly on a Monday morning time marches on and we have to get to the end of the business that’s there and move on.

This prioritising of getting through the business of the meeting, over working through any disagreements, was also picked up by the female associate vicar, Harriet, who expressed concern that the balance was over-focused on the task, with inadequate attention to the relationships within the team:

So how important is the team? Or is it just about everybody getting on with their little jobs and getting the overall task job done? ... And so for me I think there needs to be more focus on spending more time as a team with God, and with one another, because are we saying this team is important at all and why?

This tension between a focus on task versus a focus on relationship is a classic issue when dealing with disagreement and conflict.³⁴⁰ Where the balance should lie will depend on the circumstances and context, and the nature of the issue. In this case the vicar and associate vicar at St Peter’s expressed different views as to where the priority should lie in dealing with disagreement within their team meetings.

The senior administrator at St Peter’s, Martha, took her further reflections in another direction:

And I think we are very much open to what he [i.e. God] wants, so I think it’ll be as iron sharpens iron, so man sharpens one another. So I think we are

³⁴⁰ As expressed, for example, in Thomas and Kilmann, *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* and in Kraybill, *Style Matters*, which both illustrate five different approaches to conflict that place different emphases on task (or personal goals) and relationship (or the concerns of others).

there to hone whatever ideas and purpose of ministry we've got against each other, and unless these things are discussed and debated, and there is conflict, [*implied*, then they won't be adequately discerned, clarified or resolved], because we know conflict can bring good as well as bad. So it'll be that healthy conflict [which] brings about his [i.e. God's] purposes in and through the team. That's not a holy answer; that's what I genuinely think!

Her reference to iron sharpening iron was to Proverbs 27:17: 'As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.' From this she drew the principle that God's purposes are worked out through 'healthy conflict' among the staff team, and that the purpose of the staff team is to 'hone' and refine the ideas and sense of purpose that individual team members bring, and that through this they will be able to discern what it is that God wants.

Turning to the All Saints' team, the three interviewed were the vicar, Patrick, the administrator, Monty, and the minister in training, Tracy. They all started in very different places with their initial responses to the first question, but then converged as they considered the practical application. The vicar, Patrick, started out:

Well, theologically I think he [i.e. God] wants us to love one another above all else, and if we get everything else wrong but that right, I'd be happier than if we got everything else right and got that wrong. So I'd say that's got to be our first priority. I think he wants us to be fruitful and effective, and that necessitates that we say what we think, and that we love those that we disagree with and disagree with those that we love.

I note that he picked up two themes expressed by Jesus in John's Gospel, first about the priority of the disciples loving one another (e.g. John 15:12 & 17) and second the need for them to be fruitful and effective (e.g. John 15:1-8). However, he swiftly moved to the implication of what it means to be fruitful and effective, arguing that this meant speaking one's mind, loving those with whom we disagree and being able to express disagreement with those whom we love. So he saw love being worked out through expressing and engaging with disagreement.

The administrator, Monty, started at a practical level when asked about what God wanted from them as a team in handling disagreement:

Well, I think as a Christian team, there are a number of things. Firstly we shouldn't shy away from a conflict, and that's important, because what happens if they [i.e. the tensions] don't surface, they either come out in other places, or they come out in conversations in the office when half the team aren't there ... it's a very fine line between gossip and sharing things and we don't always get that right. But ideally it shouldn't be like that [i.e. raising

concerns when someone is not present], we should be able to talk about it between ourselves and deal with the conflicts. I think they shouldn't be left to fester, so they should be dealt with reasonably quickly, straight away ideally. It obviously needs to be done within the context of love.

He saw God wanting the staff team to address tensions and conflicts directly with one another, and to do so promptly. But having begun on a practical note, he concluded these reflections by asserting the need for things to be addressed directly 'within the context of love' – indicating something of the caring way that tensions might be raised, and the spirit with which this should be done.

The minister in training, Tracy, began at yet a different place with a focus on God's desire for the staff members to grow into maturity (echoing an idea in Ephesians 4:11-13, that God gives different roles 'so that the body of Christ might be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ'):³⁴¹

I think he [i.e. God] probably wants us to grow as people and grow in holiness and grow as disciples; that's what I think he'd like. And I think the way Jesus dealt with people was much more confrontational in an entirely positive way, so [*uncompleted sentence*] ... But sometimes it's more private, like if I have a disagreement with someone, the staff meeting isn't the place to talk about it if it's a one-to-one thing, not at all. ... So I think God would like us to be united, and honest without being destructive, and affirming and encouraging, and not in any way combative or competitive. And I think he would like us to be more available and vulnerable to each other, and more trusting of each other.

She pointed to three key ingredients for how this growth as people and as disciples might happen. First was a willingness to confront one another, following the example of Jesus as she sees it, while being careful to choose the appropriate arena for that confrontation. Second was the capacity to be 'honest without being destructive' while also affirming and encouraging one another – which suggests striking a good balance between negative and positive critique, rather than just raising a negative concern. Third was a willingness to be vulnerable with one another, and to give the space for this to happen by being available to one another.

A striking element of the reflections of two of the All Saints staff is that they saw a significant exemplary role for the staff team in addressing disagreement and conflict within the church. This was expressed by Tracy, the minister in training who concluded her comments quoted above by saying: 'because I think if we as a

³⁴¹ New International Version

staff team can't do that, then what hope there is for the rest of the church, I don't know.' She reflected a conviction here that the staff team sets a vital example for the church in engaging with disagreement and low-level conflict, and that if the staff team cannot do this well, then it is unrealistic to expect the rest of the church to do so. Monty, the administrator at All Saints was even more explicit in expressing the exemplary role of the staff team for the wider church. He concluded his initial remarks by saying:

And I think also as staff team there's a responsibility on us to model the way we deal with it to other members of the church, and also to each other, so that when we're dealing with our own particular teams and conflicts within the teams, that we're able to put into practice what we've learnt and modelled amongst ourselves.

As well as seeing the staff team needing to model how to deal with disagreement in their interactions with other people in the church, the administrator saw the staff team being a school or training ground for team members to learn how to address conflict, so that they were equipped for dealing with conflict in the teams that they headed up elsewhere in the church. This suggests that addressing disagreement within the core staff team will involve taking risks and not always getting it right but, through making mistakes, learning better how to work through conflict. As we have noted earlier, the importance of the staff team in creating the culture within the wider church is affirmed by Rendle and Beaumont in their work on the staffing and supervision of large congregations:

Health comes from the centre of an organisation – by the healthy practices of the staff and volunteers who sit in the central positions of leaders. Staff and volunteer leaders actually model and mentor the rest of the congregation in appropriate ways of relating to one another, talking with one another, making decisions with each other, and a host of other critical but hidden norms that guide the life of the congregation.³⁴²

Clearly one of these 'critical norms' concerns how the church handles disagreement and conflict, as an important element of how church people relate to and talk with one another.

Let us turn now to the responses to the three different statements that were offered expressing ways that one might view dealing with disagreement and low-level conflict in the Christian community. The three statements offered were:

³⁴² Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.195

- A. Dealing with disagreement and conflict is central and important, a core part of what it means to be a faithful Christian community.
- B. Dealing with disagreement and conflict is something that does need to be done as a Christian community, but is not really central.
- C. Dealing with disagreement and conflict is something that is a distraction from the important things about being a Christian community.

Each interviewee was asked which of the statements best reflected their own view, and was then invited to explain why that was the case.

Three of the interviewees went for statement B and three for statement A. Matthew, the vicar, and Martha, the senior administrator at St Peter's and the administrator at All Saints, Monty, opted for statement B, while the vicar, Patrick, and minister in training at All Saints, Tracy, and Harriet, the associate vicar at St Peter's opted for statement A. There were some significant common threads running through the comments of those who opted for the same statement. For the three taking the view that dealing with disagreement and conflict is something that does need to be done as a Christian community, but is not really central (statement B), one of the common threads was an anxiety about getting over-focused on disagreement or conflict, and a sense that disagreement and conflict were overall negative or bad, and therefore not something to be sought out. Matthew, the vicar of St Peter's, said:

But I think what makes me wary about putting it at [statement] A, is that there is within dealing with disagreement and conflict both the negative and the positive, and it's the negative bit that makes me slightly concerned about saying something which is – good can come out of it, but there is a negative element to it – is *central* to [being a faithful Christian community], I'd always want it to be positive through and through in the core essentials.

He therefore went on to assert that, for him, 'the core central area of Christian community is to do with loving one another, caring for one another, serving one another, fellowship together, and a common focus on the worship of Christ'. The senior administrator at St Peter's, Martha, expressed a similar concern about the negative dimension of conflict although framed slightly differently:

I'm struggling between [statements] A and B. The reason is, I think disagreement and conflict to me implies an unhappy community in general. I know I've just said that good comes out of disagreement, which is very true.

But it's the level of pain and hurt that is within that conflict [*implied*, that concerns me].

This seemed to point to an understanding of conflict as something relatively escalated in intensity. Monty, the administrator at All Saints took a similar if slightly different rationale for choosing statement B:

As a Christian community we ought to be on a journey towards redemption. You could perceive a situation where if we were operating effectively there wouldn't be conflict, and certainly I'm sure that's God's ideal for us in terms of a loving Christian community.

Given his conviction that the ideal of a loving Christian community is one where there is no conflict, it was not surprising that he opted for statement B. However, it seemed from later comments that his understanding of 'conflict' was of something quite escalated, what he termed a 'conflict situation', which needs to be addressed when it arises but, as he expressed, 'my hope would be that those situations are few and far between'. (In retrospect one can wonder if it might have been helpful for me to have made some attempt within the interviews to define how I understood the term 'conflict', in a broad and generic way, as any circumstances where there is tension over differences. Certainly some of the interviewees' different understandings of 'conflict' emerged in their responses during the interviews.)

While these three interviewees were resistant to seeing dealing with disagreement and conflict as a core part of what it means to be a faithful Christian community, all three of them were convinced of the need to address disagreement and conflict. Speaking about dealing with disagreement and conflict, Matthew, the vicar of St Peter's said, 'the danger is that we ignore it and that we bury it, and that's not an option, and so it *needs* to be done'. Likewise Martha, the senior administrator of St Peter's affirmed, 'it will happen because it's natural and it's good that it happens, and it needs to be dealt with wisely when it does'. Similarly Monty, the administrator at All Saints said, 'conflict is part of what it is to work as a team, and while I wouldn't go out and seek conflict ... I would certainly not shy away from it when it happens ... [It is] something that does need to be done as a Christian community but is not central'. Hence all three were quick to dismiss statement C of the three options, and explored whether they could go as far as statement A, concluding that they could not.

Let us turn to the three interviewees who did choose statement A, who saw dealing with disagreement and conflict as central and important to a faithful Christian community. Patrick, the vicar and Tracy, the minister in training at All Saints were both quick and firm in their choice of statement A. The vicar, Patrick, mustered a number of reasons for his choice. He began by asserting that:

living in Christian community is always about disagreeing, and loving those you disagree with; because a church of two will have a disagreement ... Jesus said, 'Love one another. After loving God it's the most important thing', and that's what it comes down to, I think. So I'd say it is core of what it means to be a faithful Christian community, absolutely.

As well as understanding dealing with disagreement and conflict as a key element of working out what it means to love one another, in fulfilment of Jesus' teaching (especially the teaching offered in John's Gospel), he pointed to several other reference points. Next was a theme he discerned in the wider biblical witness:

Throughout the Bible and the history of the church there's disagreements, Paul and Barnabas, the council in Jerusalem, Acts 15, all this stuff is going on, it's as the church engages through that – which is why those stories are recorded for us – that we can learn from that, that the church grows and is effective in its witness.

So from his reading of the Bible he saw a connection between addressing disagreement, and church growth and effectiveness in witness. He then referred to his personal experience of being part of several different Christian communities over twenty-five years where he found that 'if you're going to maintain Christian community you need to know how to disagree well and how to handle those differences in opinion, those differences in style, even those differences in theology'. Developing this further he said that 'where you learn to love those that you disagree with, something powerful and beautiful happens'. His conviction also came out of his understanding of the corporate nature of the church: 'I'd say practically that we're called to be a team, we're called to be an army, we're called to be a body, and all of those things depend on a unity of the spirit even where there's necessary disagreement in other things.' This reflected an understanding of unity that embraces and lives with diversity.

For the minister in training at All Saints, Tracy, the starting point was her understanding of the meaning of the Christian unity that Jesus prays for:

I think [statement] A, because of Jesus' prayer in John 17 about unity. So if you can't deal with it [i.e. disagreement and conflict], if we don't deal with it, then we're not doing God's work and we can't function properly ... Otherwise you're sweeping things under the carpet and being false and pretending; because you can't have mission or love if you can't deal with each other first.

This reflected an understanding of unity not as something bland, but as emerging from Christians having faced into and dealt with the tensions, disagreements and differences between them, and holding together in the face of those differences. She herself spelt this out later in the interview:

It's a place where growth can take place and a deepening of faith and recognition that God made us all different and it's a question of loving each other, despite differences and being able to work with each other and forgive each other and move on, not bearing grudges.

(I note that this was the only reference by any of the interviewees to the place of forgiveness in the process of working through disagreement and conflict.) She also asserted the important role here of those in leadership within the church: 'certainly the leadership of a church has to be committed to it, otherwise it won't happen.' She also made an observation about social mobility, particularly in the urban context:

I've often thought that in the early church or when you were living in a small community you had to deal with it because there was nowhere else to go. Whereas these days people can just go off to another church, particularly if we're living in a town or a city, you don't have to [i.e. deal with it]. So I think it's absolutely essential [i.e. to deal with disagreement and conflict].

Finally, there was Harriet, the associate vicar at St Peter's who started off rather ambivalently. On the one hand she was concerned that there is a danger that dealing with disagreement and conflict 'can be a distraction, or you can spend too much time on it. But on the other hand good relationship is a core part of Christian community'. After giving an extended illustration from her church of how difficult and time-consuming dealing with conflict can be, she eventually concluded,

So I think it is central, because ... it comes out of our relationship with God ... And Jesus was ... relating to people the whole time. It wasn't about structures and getting the task done, actually it was all about relationship. So, yes, I suppose [statement] A is my answer! <laughter>

She accounted for her view by explaining that she saw herself as 'a fairly relational sort of person' who put more of a priority on good relationships than achieving the task; and based on her experience as a teacher where she found that if children

‘aren’t feeling secure and OK in their relationships’ then they cannot concentrate on their work, and it ‘affects everything’.

3. Commentary on the Theological Reflection by Staff Team Members

In commenting on the interviewees’ theological reflection, it seems worth first noting the range of sources that they have drawn on in offering their reflections. Most of the interviewees drew in different ways on their own life experience. A second, related source, which a couple of the interviewees drew on, was reflection on their own personal style. A third important source which nearly all of the interviewees drew on – unsurprisingly given that the churches of both teams sit within the Evangelical spectrum – was reflection on some of the biblical texts, in different ways. (There was one hint at another source, in terms of church tradition, when Matthew, the vicar of St Peter’s said that ‘I think, because I’m an Anglican, I will probably go for [statement] B, because it needs to be done’. However he did not elaborate how being an Anglican informed this choice, and it was not picked up on during the interview.)

Patrick, the vicar of All Saints, talked about the cumulative impact of his experience in a number of different Christian communities over twenty-five years. He also cited as significant his experience of coming to faith through the witness of a diverse group of Christians:

And part of my history is that I came back to faith as a result of an outreach of an ecumenical mission organisation; where there were Lutherans and Catholics and Baptists and Anglicans and everything else, working together. And one of the things that drew me back to faith was the [recognition] of, ‘OK, well, you’re not all divided, you’re working together, so that’s something that you have in common.’ So it’s that co-working, that collaboration [*sic*, his pronunciation], that partnership that is foundational I’d say.

It seems noteworthy that his early experience of diverse Christians working together provided a witness which was later confirmed by his subsequent experience of different churches.

The shaping force of one’s church experience also came through the story of Martha, the senior administrator at St Peter’s:

So I think we [as a church] have been in a place ... where dealing with it [i.e. disagreement and conflict] has been central and important because there has

been so much pain. But I think we've worked a lot of the way through that before [the current vicar's] time, and very much [Matthew, the vicar,] has been a main part in dealing with that in this Christian community, which is why I now tend to veer towards [statement] B, saying that it is a natural thing in any, including this Christian community, but I'd hope it wouldn't be central because to me central implies an unhappy community, and I don't think we are that unhappy or a community in so much disunity.

It seems that the experience of particularly painful conflict within this church had led the senior administrator to conclude that to see dealing with disagreement and conflict as central and important would imply either that the church was particularly unhappy or divided, or that one was having to face a great deal of pain, neither of which she saw as desirable. Neither implication is inherent in the statement, in my view, but it seems that the administrator's experience led her to read it in that way.

The vicar of St Peter's, Matthew, also drew not just on his own experience, but his own style and that of his immediate family, in reaching a view on how central and important it is to deal with disagreement and conflict. He commented:

But I'm not convinced by those who argue that disagreement and conflict, if you don't have it, you don't have an honest and open relationship. It can be the case. [My wife] and I go through life without arguing, we just don't tend to do it. My son-in-law and his parents argue over anything and nothing, and they flare up, and then it all dies down and our daughter can't cope with that, and [our son-in-law] has had to learn that it doesn't *work* like that. So those who argue, 'You've got to have disagreement and conflict in order to have honesty', I'm not convinced by.

He then explained that 'because of my own character and style' he opted for statement B that dealing with disagreement and conflict is not really central, even though it needs to be done as a Christian community. It seems that he saw his own style, which was shared by other members of his immediate family, as providing a particular way of operating which could be determinative of how one should approach dealing with disagreement and conflict in the church.

In looking at the use of the Bible by the interviewees, I will find it helpful to refer to what Richard Hays sees as the four primary ways or 'modes' in which we might look for the Bible to speak to us.³⁴³ Hays indicates that the Bible may be a source of: *rules* (direct commands or prohibitions); *principles* (general

³⁴³ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1996), p.209

frameworks); *paradigms* (stories of people who model exemplary conduct) – or negative paradigms (where reprehensible conduct is modelled); and *a symbolic world* (categories for interpreting reality).

The most common appeal to the Scriptures by the interviewees was to a principle they saw as relevant. So Tracy, the minister in training at All Saints saw Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17 as indicating the principle that 'you can't have mission or love if you can't deal with each other first' and addressing any disagreement in the Christian community as therefore central and important. Similarly, Matthew, the vicar of St Peter's saw a recurring principle in two of the New Testament epistles: 'if you pick up on Ephesians 4 or 1 Corinthians 12, there's both a sense of unity but also diversity.' This led him to apply the principle to the staff team: 'So I think there needs to be space within a team, for folk to come with different gifts and reflections', and he then illustrated this with specific examples from the current team. A further principle that he highlighted was the primacy of loving one another: 'Well, I think in terms of Christian community, if you look at 1 John, it's about building one another up ... the core central area of Christian community is to do with love one another, care for one another, serving one another.' His interpretation of what it means to love one another led him away from seeing dealing with disagreement and conflict as central and important.

It was interesting that Patrick, the vicar of All Saints pointed to the primacy of the same principle: 'Jesus said, "Love one another. After loving God it's the most important thing", and that's what it comes down to, I think.' However, his interpretation of what it means to love one another led him to a different conclusion to Matthew: 'living in Christian community is always about disagreeing, and loving those you disagree with ... So I'd say it is core of what it means to be a faithful Christian community, absolutely.' This divergence points to the limitations of drawing on a principle in the Bible such as the priority of loving one another, because there may be different understandings of what love looks like in practice.

The senior administrator at St Peter's, Martha, appealed to a different and more specific principle expressed by Proverbs 27:17: 'As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.' It is interesting to note that she did not think her observation on this was necessarily religiously correct, although it was her personal conviction: 'That's not a holy answer; that's what I genuinely think!' However, theologically what she expressed is an important idea, which is that God's purposes

are worked out through ‘healthy conflict’ among the staff team, and that the purpose of the staff team is to ‘hone’ and refine the ideas and sense of purpose that individual team members bring, and that through this they will be able to discern what it is that God wants. I suggest that this points to the idea, not explicitly expressed by any of the other interviewees, that team members are co-workers with God, and that God is present and active through the interactions between team members, especially as they discuss, debate and explore conflict with one another. What is perhaps missing from her insight is the sense that there may also be need to interweave a reflection on God’s word, which Luke Timothy Johnson highlights is a key feature of the early church’s discernment and decision-making.³⁴⁴

The other main use of the Bible was by appealing to certain paradigms. Unsurprisingly, Jesus was seen as an important paradigm. Harriet, the female associate vicar at St Peter’s saw Jesus modelling a primary focus on relationships: ‘Jesus was like that in all his relationships, I mean that was what he was doing, he was relating to people the whole time. It wasn’t about structures and getting the task done, actually it was all about relationship.’ However, in my view this interpretation of the paradigm that Jesus offers is debatable: there are numerous examples of Jesus being focused on his particular mission and calling, regardless of what people around him might want. For example, early in Mark’s Gospel, when people are searching for him, and Jesus responds: ‘Let us go to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there: for that is what I came to do’ (Mark 1:38), or in Luke’s Gospel, when we see Jesus focus on his destiny: ‘When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem’ (Luke 9:51). However, we can affirm that exploring the tension between a focus on task or on relationship is an interesting one in light of the different pictures of Jesus painted by the Gospels, and is pertinent to considering how to handle disagreement and conflict within the church.

The minister in training at All Saints, Tracy, also looked to Jesus as a paradigm, but possibly in a more surprising way: ‘I think the way Jesus dealt with people was much more confrontational in an entirely positive way’, and she saw the example of Jesus confronting others as a model for the staff team members to follow in their dealings with one another. One might argue about whether Jesus’s

³⁴⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), pp.81-108

confrontation of others was always done in a positive way, but the fact that he regularly confronted others, both his disciples and his opponents, is well attested by the Gospels. And a willingness to confront others is certainly relevant to engaging with disagreement and conflict in the Christian community, and so this seems an appropriate reflection on Jesus as a paradigm.

The vicar of All Saints, Patrick, made a more conscious use of a biblical paradigm when he observed:

Throughout the Bible and the history of the church there's disagreements, Paul and Barnabas, the council in Jerusalem, Acts 15, all this stuff is going on, it's as the church engages through that, which is why those stories are recorded for us, that we can learn from that, that the church grows and is effective in its witness.

What is noteworthy here is that he articulated an understanding that the purpose of stories of disagreement being recorded in the Bible is for us to learn from them, and that part of his learning from these stories was that the church grows as it journeys through its conflicts, including in the effectiveness of its witness. This seems to me a reasonable conclusion from reflecting on the church-wide conflict in Acts 15, seen in a more condensed way in Acts 6, and indeed throughout Acts, as Johnson helpfully illustrates.³⁴⁵

In Acts 6 we see the early church facing the challenge of ensuring that the needs of both the Hebrew- and Greek-speaking sections of the community are fairly served; and addressing this by making a structural adjustment to the leadership group by appointing a group of Greek-speaking leaders – judging from their Greek names, in Acts 6:5 – to join the leadership group. (While it seems from Acts 6:2-4 that the apostles may have initially envisaged a more limited role for these Greek-speaking leaders; the subsequent story, in Acts 6:8 – Acts 8:40, shows two of these leaders, Stephen and Philip, exercising full apostolic ministries. This should not come as a surprise, as it is clear that the appointing of the seven symbolised ‘the transmission of spiritual authority’ to these men.³⁴⁶)

In Acts 15 the early church is facing the deeper challenge of whether and how to integrate the Gentiles into the people of God, in the light of what they have experienced God doing by his Spirit. (And it is clear from the New Testament epistles that this was a long-running conflict within the church, probably only

³⁴⁵ Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*

³⁴⁶ Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, p.86

partially resolved by the decisions recorded in Acts 15.) What emerges from the account in Acts is that in working through the conflict and listening to the range of different views, the community discerns that God's love and purposes are wider than they had previously been able to grasp, and they are able to reach a consensus around the conclusion that 'God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life' (Acts 11:18) and that God is not requiring the Gentiles to have to become Jews, epitomised by the mark of circumcision, but is doing a new thing. The church's discernment is that what has happened is clearly 'God's work in the world', even though it goes counter to the way that they have been used to him working.³⁴⁷

The final biblical reference by one of the interviewees was a more broad-brush one, but is probably also a type of paradigm. The female associate vicar at St Peter's, Harriet, offered the following comment:

So I think it [i.e. dealing with disagreement and conflict] is central, because it comes out of our relationship with God and he has a wonderful relationship within himself, and that was all fractured in Eden, there was a breakdown of relationship between us and him, and between the people that he started off with. And actually redemption is about hauling all of that back and bringing about a place where there is no mourning or crying or tears. So relationship is really quite key.

While there are references here to the fall of humans in Genesis 3 and to the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21, the associate vicar painted a broad-brush picture of God's over-arching redemptive work in history. From this she drew a conclusion that because God's commitment is to restore the broken relationship between humans and God, so our relationships in the church should reflect a similar commitment, and thus that it is central for us to work at addressing disagreement and conflict among us. We can affirm this perspective in terms of the importance of addressing conflict when there is some kind of breakdown in relationship. In reflecting on the creation stories in Genesis, we can also affirm that the need to live in right relationship with one another flows from our creation in God's image, as Dempsey and Shapiro express it:

Because all creation is interrelated and human beings are created in God's image according to God's likeness, human beings are called to live together

³⁴⁷ Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, p.102

in right relationship with one another and with all creation. Right relationship, then, is essential to sustaining creation.³⁴⁸

However, there may be an assumption in the associate vicar's reflections that disagreement and conflict are a consequence of sin and the fall, an assumption which can be challenged. As Schrock-Shenk has observed, conflict is natural and built into creation and God's design of the world.³⁴⁹ By creating a world of extraordinary diversity, by creating a world where human beings are different from one another (epitomised by but not limited to the difference in gender), and by granting human beings free will and the capacity to make choices, God created a world that was wired for disagreement and conflict before sin entered into the picture. As Schrock-Shenk proposes, we can take the view that: 'Since sin had not yet entered the world, [Adam and Eve's] responses to those conflicts were collaborative, constructive and positive. Perhaps sin and evil entered precisely when they chose a negative response to the conflict they encountered.'³⁵⁰

If one accepts this view, then disagreement and conflict are normal and natural parts of life that we should expect to encounter, especially in any form of human community where our differences bump up against one another. While there are always risks of fracture and disconnection (which some of the interviewees were particularly aware of), working through disagreement and conflict also offers important opportunities for personal growth, for greater intimacy and understanding in our relationships, and for discerning God's will and purposes in the world.³⁵¹

In conclusion, I note that most of the staff team members interviewed did consider their engagement with disagreement, differences and tension as part of the calling of the Christian community, to differing degrees. Some saw it as central and important, while others saw it as necessary but not central. Most were able to articulate some level of theological reflection to support their view. Within the scope of the interviews, the level of theological reflection was understandably limited, while some of the theological views were debatable, and some drew contradictory conclusions from the same biblical principle.

³⁴⁸ Carol Dempsey and Elayne Shapiro, *Reading the Bible, Transforming Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), p.6

³⁴⁹ Schrock-Shenk, 'Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation', p.30

³⁵⁰ Schrock-Shenk, 'Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation', p.30

³⁵¹ See Schrock-Shenk, 'Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation', p.27. The last point is my own.

4. Wider Theological Reflections

Having explored the theological reflections offered by those members of the staff teams that were interviewed, it is now appropriate to consider whether there are any wider theological reflections that can offer a helpful framework within which to place and interpret some of the findings of the field research, and which may assist in reflecting Christianly on conflict within the life of the church.

The field research has highlighted the significant impact that the vicar has on the dynamics of a staff team meeting, especially in relation to how disagreement and conflict is handled. As a first theological strand, it therefore seems appropriate to view leadership of a staff team, in some ways epitomised by the chairing of the team meeting, as an exercise in the *episcopate* or oversight aspect of a vicar's ministry. As I have noted earlier, Steven Croft has set out how vital this episcopal aspect of ministry is for today's church.³⁵² This dimension of ministry is likely to be particularly pertinent to leadership of larger churches which have a staff team, but it will probably be relevant to most leaders in parish ministry leading any kind of team. Croft also points out that *episcopate* is a shared responsibility.³⁵³ He articulates this in terms of an oversight responsibility for a local church shared between the incumbent and lay leaders, such as churchwardens and the PCC. In the context of a large Anglican church with a staff team, I want to extend this to propose that oversight of the staff team and the staff team meetings is seen as an episcopal task that the vicar shares with the rest of the staff team, and not something that the vicar does alone. The oversight of the staff team is mutual, even if the vicar has a primary responsibility.

What might this mean in practice? Here is one example to illustrate a team member sharing in an aspect of the episcopal task. Let us imagine that a staff team has had a lengthy discussion on a particular item. The vicar indicates that he wants to move on to a new item, conscious of the time and other agenda items they hope to cover in the meeting. However, there has been no summary of the discussion, and it is not clear what follow-up action is to be taken. Exercising an aspect of oversight responsibility, one of the team members might say: 'Before we move on, I would find it helpful if we could briefly summarise the main elements of

³⁵² Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, pp.154-192

³⁵³ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.170

the discussion, and clarify what action if any is going to be taken next.’ Prompted by this colleague, the vicar might then offer a brief summary and propose who is going to take what step next, and then check this with the rest of team. Only after agreement to this conclusion would the vicar move onto the next item.

Or consider a second example, based on an incident observed in one of the case studies, in an attempt to show how it could have played out differently. One of associate vicars asks how the other team members are doing at meeting the challenge they have set for church members to pray for another person at the same time each day. The vicar says that he does not want to put individual team members on the spot over this. Exercising an aspect of the episcopal function, another member of the team might observe:

I think I heard the associate vicar’s concern as being about us providing an example for the rest of the church when we set them a challenge such as this. Did I understand that correctly? If so, I wonder whether we could consider how we might address that concern in this case?

Recognising that a legitimate concern has been identified, the vicar might then respond by asking for team members’ views on how to address that concern, while also taking account of the concern that he has voiced to avoid putting individuals inappropriately in the spotlight. And then he might see if they can agree a way forward that the team members can support.

In implementing aspects of oversight together as a staff team, and as trust, openness and honesty within the team grows over time, team members can hopefully give feedback to one another on how they are doing at practising mutual oversight within their work together. (Such feedback may be most challenging for the vicar, and so his or her openness and lack of defensiveness will be critical.)

Beyond this shared oversight responsibility, I want to propose that the staff team meeting is seen as a key learning ground, for both the vicar and the other members of the staff team, to work out what *episcopo* means in practice, as preparation for the exercise of that episcopal task elsewhere in the ministry of the vicar and other team members. As we have seen, Monty, the administrator of All Saints helpfully articulated a similar idea. Within the New Testament, there are hints that Jesus saw the group of apostles working in this way to some extent. In the face of the apostles’ competitiveness and desire to have more seniority or control within the group, Jesus challenges them to follow his own example and practise

mutual service (see Luke 22:24-27 and parallels). This mutuality is also implied in the way that Jesus calls a group of apostles to exercise collaborative, plural leadership together, which is what is then modelled in the life of the early church as described in Acts. The apostle Paul also points to a mutual *episcopo* in his final address to the leaders of the Ephesian church when he urges them to, ‘Keep watch over yourselves and all of the flock’ (Acts 20:28 – my emphasis). However, it would be fair to say that this mutuality within ministry is not a strong theme within the New Testament scriptures, nor is it the primary model of church leadership that has been practised through much of the church’s history. It may also be in tension with the episcopal model of leadership within the Church of England, at least as it has been historically practised. However, as we noted in the literature review, contemporary writers on ministry are now suggesting that this model of more mutual, collaborative ministry may be a more faithful way of conceiving of ministry today.³⁵⁴

A sailing metaphor may be one way of conceptualising this idea of mutual oversight within ministry. We can picture the incumbent or vicar as the captain of the ship; whoever is chairing the meeting as the navigator or helmsman (which might be the captain at times, and other members of the crew on occasion); and other members of the team as the crew with various different responsibilities. Any member of the crew – not just the captain – might say, ‘Hang on, we seem to have lost a sense of where we’re heading – or at least I have done so’ or, ‘We seem to be following a different wind to before – can we move back to the earlier tack?’ In this way everyone takes responsibility for ensuring that the ship stays on course, that the sails are tight, and so on. It is a team effort, but with particular responsibilities for certain people. The captain can take the helm; but so can others with enough confidence, or who might benefit from developing their skills, such as the curate. And there will be certain situations where only the most trusted will take the helm, for example when coming into harbour and docking. So with trickiest and most heated issues, there will be a need to have wise and experienced hands in control of the process.

As a second theological strand, I propose that the functioning of the staff team of a larger church offers an opportunity to work out part of what it means to be

³⁵⁴ Greenwood, *Parish Priests*; Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry*; Robertson, *Collaborative Ministry*

the church. Among the dozens of different images of the church used by New Testament writers, Craig van Gelder identifies four ‘core images’ that ‘reveal essential aspects of this new community of faith created by the Spirit’.³⁵⁵ His four core images are the people of God, the body of Christ, the communion or fellowship of saints, and the creation of the Spirit. Two of these are particularly pertinent to the functioning of a staff team: the body of Christ and the fellowship of saints.

The interactions and relationships within a staff team, particularly through a regular team meeting, provide an opportunity for the vicar and team members to work out what it means to be the body of Christ, and to experience the *koinonia* or fellowship of the saints. In his exploration of what it means for the church to be the body of Christ, a key aspect that Paul highlights in 1 Corinthians is the variety and diversity of the body, along with its essential unity: see 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 and 12:1-31. Paul expresses this succinctly elsewhere: ‘Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.’ (Romans 12:4-5).³⁵⁶ The last phrase points to the interdependent relationships that are meant to exist within the church.³⁵⁷ One of the challenges of forming Christian community is in recognising and living out of this interdependency, as Paul articulates in the imagined dialogues in 1 Corinthians 12 between different parts of the body which struggle to recognise this.

As we have seen, several of the interviewees were conscious of the staff team functioning as an expression of the body of Christ. An effective staff team will be made up of people with different and diverse gifts, and of people with a variety of different styles or personality types. Learning to understand, to live with, and to affirm those differences is part of what a staff team will need to work at, and in so doing they will be exploring what it means to be the body of Christ.

This is closely linked to the idea of the fellowship of saints. ‘The essential idea of the fellowship of saints is that we now experience God and each other in reconciled relationships based on what we share in common in Christ.’³⁵⁸ For the staff team members, exploring what they share in common in Christ could be an aspect of building unity in the face of their differences.

³⁵⁵ Van Gelder, *Essence of the Church*, pp.107-113

³⁵⁶ New International Version

³⁵⁷ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, p.110

³⁵⁸ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, p.111

To my mind, this points to relationships that develop into friendships, as Stephen Pickard proposes: ‘If the truth of our lives in Christ is that we are inescapably “one of another” [Romans 12:5] then friendship is encoded in our life together.’³⁵⁹ Within the context of a Church of England staff team, then this certainly raises the challenge of ‘how to be a friend within relationships of unequal power relations’.³⁶⁰ However, as Pickard affirms, this does not mean that friendship can be dismissed as an essential aspect of collaborative ministry, because friendship seems to be central to what Jesus calls his disciples to – both friendship with himself, and through him, friendship with one another. In John 15:12-17, Jesus interweaves his new designation of the disciples as his friends with his call for them to imitate him in their love for one another. Loving one another would therefore seem to include being friends who share with one another at a deep level, as Jesus models for them. Pickard concludes, ‘This means that the real art and challenge of collaborative ministry is to live as “one of another” in friendship within differing levels of formal and public authority.’³⁶¹ He does not pretend that this is easy, but rather recognises that it will require a certain level of ‘spiritual maturity’.

In practice we can expect that working at being the body of Christ, living in the fellowship of the saints and developing meaningful friendship will lead Christian disciples to have to face their disagreements and their own brokenness, and to deal with the ways we misunderstand, hurt and offend one another. This leads us to a third theological strand. A staff team that works at building fellowship and at being the body of Christ will also need to develop a more faithful understanding of differences and conflict, and will also need to engage in the practice of peacemaking and reconciliation.

In a recent presentation, Sam Wells (an English theologian influenced by Stanley Hauerwas) offers a helpful theological conception of how we are to view differences and conflict from a Christian perspective.³⁶² Wells makes three claims. The first claim is that, ‘Creation is, by its very nature, the inception of difference. God is pure essence; but when that essence is translated, by a process we call creation, into time-bound and contingent existence, then out of nothing comes

³⁵⁹ Pickard, *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry*, p.234

³⁶⁰ Pickard, *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry*, p.234

³⁶¹ Pickard, *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry*, p.235

³⁶² Samuel Wells, ‘The Exasperating Patience of God’, presentation to the Faith in Conflict conference at Coventry Cathedral, 26 February 2013, available at <http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/downloads/publications/2013-02-26a.pdf> [accessed 12/8/13]

diversity'.³⁶³ This is an important claim in that it asserts that difference and diversity are built in to God's good creation. Wells' second claim is that, 'Heaven is the perfection of difference. ... Heaven is ... a dynamic interaction of God, redeemed creatures and the renewed creation ... It's not the absorption of all difference into the infinite, or the reversal of creation by the assertion of God alone'.³⁶⁴ This claim is significant in that it suggests that the heavenly future in store for God's people is not one which will be conflict-free, but one in which differences will continue to be present, and thus will continue to have to be negotiated. Wells' third claim is that, 'Between creation ... and heaven ... lies the story of God. And the story of God is, from beginning to end, and at every moment along the way, a story of tension and conflict'.³⁶⁵ He goes on to illustrate this with reference to the key stories of the Old Testament making the point that, 'at every stage salvation is contested, and emerges out of setback, suffering and fierce debate'.³⁶⁶ We therefore need to see engagement with differences, tension and conflict as at the heart of existence and of working out human beings' relationship with God and with one another. This leads us to exploring the practice of reconciliation, and to recognising that 'reconciliation *is* the gospel'.³⁶⁷

Wells' final assertion here is borne out by a careful scrutiny of the New Testament. In an outstanding *tour de force*, Willard Swartley has shown how peace, peacemaking and reconciliation, despite their neglect by the theological academy, are not marginal interests of the New Testament writers, but are central to the gospel that they have to share.³⁶⁸ He concludes his extensive survey by asserting that the New Testament 'speaks univocally and pervasively of peace and peacemaking as one central feature of the gospel'.³⁶⁹ He illustrates how, 'The gospel narrative as a whole presents Jesus as a paradigm for peacemaking'.³⁷⁰ He demonstrates how the New Testament presents:

a positive calling for believers. It asks us not only to commit to nonviolence ... but it overwhelmingly enlists us in the service of seeking to overcome

³⁶³ Wells, 'The Exasperating Patience of God', p.4

³⁶⁴ Wells, 'The Exasperating Patience of God', p.5

³⁶⁵ Wells, 'The Exasperating Patience of God', p.5

³⁶⁶ Wells, 'The Exasperating Patience of God', p.5

³⁶⁷ Wells, 'The Exasperating Patience of God', p.6

³⁶⁸ Willard Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006)

³⁶⁹ Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, p.418

³⁷⁰ Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, p.416

evil with good, to love the enemy, pray for the abuser, and be peacemakers.³⁷¹

Peacemaking is thus ‘a Christian practice, the sort of thing one learns to do better by intentionally practicing it. Such practice embraces one’s spiritual disciplines ... as well as taking concrete action-steps.’³⁷² Stanley Haeurwas asserts that the practice of peacemaking is at the heart of the Christian church and definitive of its life:

‘Peacemaking among Christians ... is not simply one activity among others but rather is the very form of the church insofar as the church is the form of the one who “is our peace” [Ephesians 2:14]. Peacemaking is the form of our relations in the church as we seek to be in unity with one another, which at least means that we begin to share a common history. Such unity is not built on a shallow optimism that we can get along if we respect one another’s differences. Rather it is a unity that profoundly acknowledges our differences because we have learned that those differences are not accidental to our being truthful people – even when they require us to confront one another as those who have wronged us.’³⁷³

From this perspective, peacemaking is ‘anything but boring’.³⁷⁴ Rather it is demanding, and requires a facing into and active engagement with conflict, and working at the reconciliation of our differences.

Encouragingly, there are now good practical resources to assist Christians wanting to work at the practice of peacemaking.³⁷⁵ There is accessible literature setting out a vision for reconciliation in the Christian life, reminding us that ‘reconciliation is always a journey of transformation toward a new future of friendship with God and people, a holistic and concrete vision of human flourishing’.³⁷⁶ There is also specific training available for Christian leaders and ministers in Britain.³⁷⁷

Given the paradigmatic peacemaking example of Jesus and the centrality of peacemaking and reconciliation to the gospel, the vicar and members of the staff team of larger churches need not feel embarrassed or doubtful about seeing this as a

³⁷¹ Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, p.420

³⁷² Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, pp.425-6

³⁷³ Stanley Haeurwas, ‘Peacemaking: The Virtue of the Church’ in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living in Between* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1988), p.95

³⁷⁴ Haeurwas, ‘Peacemaking: The Virtue of the Church’, p.92

³⁷⁵ For example, Kreider et al., *A Culture of Peace*; and Schrock-Shenk and Ressler, *Making Peace with Conflict*

³⁷⁶ Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), p.148

³⁷⁷ For example, the courses run by Bridge Builders, see Bridge Builders (n.d.) www.bbministries.org.uk [accessed 2/4/12]

core part of their practice together. Much of the time this peacemaking will be at a fairly ordinary level, addressing the everyday disagreements and misunderstandings that arise, and which are likely to surface in the context of team meetings, especially if the vicar or chair person gives space for engaging with them. In this way, the team meeting may become a primary arena for the staff team to address differences and conflict, typically at a low level, and to work at what peacemaking means in practice. This will need to include developing the ‘habit’ of forgiveness as a key way in which ‘God’s love moves toward reconciliation’.³⁷⁸ As the parable at the end of Matthew 18 illustrates, the capacity to develop such a habit will only come when we grasp how much we have been forgiven:

‘What it seems we must remember, if we are to be peacemakers capable of confronting one another with our sins, is that we are forgiven and we are part of a community of the forgiven. Our ability to be truthful peacemakers depends on our learning that we owe our lives to God’s unrelenting forgiveness.’³⁷⁹

We can therefore affirm that a church staff team that works at such practical peacemaking and reconciliation, will fulfil a central aspect of their calling as Christian disciples.

Hence my own view is that dealing with disagreement and conflict is central and important, that practising peacemaking and reconciliation is at the heart of what it means to be a faithful Christian community. As John Howard Yoder has written, in his commentary on what the Anabaptists called ‘the rule of Christ’ set out in Matthew 18:15-20:

To be human is to be in conflict, to offend and to be offended. To be human in the light of the gospel is to face conflict in redemptive dialogue. When we do that, it is God who does it. When we do that, we demonstrate that to process conflict is not merely a palliative strategy for tolerable survival or psychic hygiene, but a mode of truth-finding and community-building.³⁸⁰

When a group is engaged on this path of ‘truth-finding and community-building’ in the light of God’s love, then they have entered into the journey of working out what it means to be the church in today’s world.³⁸¹

³⁷⁸ L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p.163

³⁷⁹ Haeurwas, ‘Peacemaking: The Virtue of the Church’, p.93

³⁸⁰ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001 [1992]), p.13

³⁸¹ See Mark Wakelin, ‘Education, Discipleship and Community Formation’ in Andrew Walker and

Luke Bretherton (eds), *Remembering Our Future: Explorations in Deep Church* (London: Paternoster, 2007), pp.207-226

VI. Proposals for Ministerial Practice and Conclusion

1. Introduction

We have followed the pastoral cycle as we have progressed through this dissertation. Having set out the rationale for the approach to be taken in Chapter III, in Chapter IV we followed the first two stages of the cycle: an immersion in the staff team meetings of the two case studies, engaging with the experience of an aspect of pastoral practice through extended direct observation; followed by an analysis of that observation and experience, as the second stage of the cycle. Then in Chapter V we sought to bring the wider Christian tradition to bear in a process of theological reflection. In this concluding chapter we seek to offer some proposals for ministerial practice, in the light of the research undertaken, as the fourth and final stage in the pastoral cycle. I suggest that the research offered here holds some implications for the training of ministers in the Church of England, has some possible implications for bishops and their staff teams, and also has some implications for the work and ministry of Bridge Builders, the service which I have directed since 1996.

2. Some Implications for the Training of Ministers in the Church of England

Writing originally in 1999, Steven Croft made the following striking claim:

For much of [the twentieth] century the Church of England has trained curates in its theological colleges and courses, not incumbents. Men and women have been prepared for different aspects of priestly ministry and have been equipped to lead services, preach sermons, and care, in different ways, for the sick and vulnerable. Yet we have not been prepared, by and large, in those dimensions of *episcopate* which involve understanding and working with groups and communities as well as individuals. We are therefore left naked in a situation of great change in society and in the churches.³⁸²

Undoubtedly the situation has changed since those words were written. This is illustrated by Roger Matthews' recent research, evaluating the effectiveness of the Clergy Leadership Programme in the Diocese of Chelmsford as a means of enabling

³⁸² Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.154

and developing collaborative, missional leaders.³⁸³ Likewise there has been a spate of books in the last 10 years holding up a vision of more collaborative ministry which seek, among other things, to build on insights from contemporary literature on leadership.³⁸⁴ However, the research conducted for this project suggests that Croft's claim continues to have some foundation. We can therefore assume that there remain some significant deficiencies in how incumbents and ministry staff teams exercise some of the practical aspects of their ministry, including how best to facilitate team and other meetings and how to engage with conflict and disagreement in those contexts – aspects of what Croft has helpfully identified as the episcopal dimension of that ministry.

David Heywood is the latest in a line of writers to point out that 'the church in Britain is journeying through a time of transition'.³⁸⁵ One of the major implications of this is the need to find a new model of ministry. Heywood helpfully spells out that this model of ministry needs to express the ministry of the whole church, and not just of the ordained. However, there are clearly implications for the ministry of the ordained as well. Two of the key implications that Heywood draws out are that 'the role of the clergy in this new model of ministry requires of them *more* professional expertise rather than less'. And in addition that 'no one person is required to display all the expertise required for ordained ministry because the leadership of God's people is to be seen as collaborative'.³⁸⁶ These implications are affirmed by the research project documented here. The research demonstrates that a key aspect of the vicar's role, especially in a larger church, is leading the staff team, and exercising a range of leadership and collaborative skills in doing so, and that the vicar's attitude towards dealing with conflict and disagreement will affect how the whole team approaches these. (In a smaller church, the role might involve leading a team of lay leaders, so the findings are likely to be relevant more broadly. Savage and Boyd-Macmillan observe that group processes and team-work are central

³⁸³ Roger Matthews, 'Using Questions in the Formation of UK Anglican Clergy as Collaborative, Missional, Culture-Transforming Leaders', unpublished DMin thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, March 2010

³⁸⁴ For example: Pritchard, *Life and Work of a Priest*; Greenwood, *Parish Priests*; and Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry*

³⁸⁵ Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry*, p.1

³⁸⁶ Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry*, p.183 (his emphasis)

aspects of church life, and highlight the need for leaders to be equipped to engage with these.³⁸⁷)

Incumbents in the Church of England therefore need to be properly equipped to lead groups and teams, and to work collaboratively with others. On the basis of the research with the two case studies presented here, it seems likely that, at present, incumbents are not adequately prepared (whether by education or life experience or both) for this central aspect of ministry in today's church. This suggests that significant changes may be required both in how clergy are prepared for ministry, and in how they receive ongoing training and support. It points to the need for today's and tomorrow's incumbents, and the members of their staff teams where they are leading a large church, to receive practical training and equipping for elements of the oversight dimension of their ministry, including how to lead and participate in team meetings, and how to embrace and deal with disagreement and conflict.

The research points to some specific skills that incumbents and staff team members might need to develop, including: how to design an effective meeting agenda; the value of focusing strictly on one item at a time; and the need to distinguish between content and process, and to ensure that there is clarity over the process being used to engage with different content items; the value and purpose of paraphrasing and summarising; how to explore and address underlying concerns behind initial positions; and how to test for agreement or consensus before finishing an item.

As Rendle and Beaumont have reminded us, in large churches the ministry staff team has a key role to play in shaping the culture of the church.³⁸⁸ (In smaller churches, the key leadership group – whether that be a standing committee, a PCC or some other group – is likely to play a similar role.) The research set out here suggests that there is therefore a need to concentrate effort on preparing these groups to function more effectively, and to be more aware of their culture-shaping impact. The research points to two aspects that may be worth focusing on in particular.

First, it suggests that incumbents and staff team members could benefit from exploring their practice of peacemaking and reconciliation in relation to

³⁸⁷ Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan, *The Human Face of Church: A Social Psychology and Pastoral Theology Resource for Pioneer and Traditional Ministry* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2007), esp. pp.3-29 & 101-127

³⁸⁸ Rendle and Beaumont, *When Moses Meets Aaron*, p.195

everyday, low-level conflict and disagreement. How do the vicar and other team members think about disagreement and conflict? What do they consider appropriate ways of addressing disagreement and conflict when it arises? Under what circumstances is it fine for the vicar to determine the outcome, and when is it important to develop a collaborative way forward? How is reconciliation worked out in practice within the team? What does forgiveness look like between colleagues? Questions such as these might usefully form part of an explicit discussion on a team away day, say on an annual basis, with the aim of developing a common understanding within the team – and recognising that this will need to be revisited as people move on and new members join the team.

Second, the research suggests that members of church staff teams can usefully take time to clarify what they mean by ‘loving one another’. Some questions which might help this exploration could include the following: What sort of relationships are team members trying to build with one another? To what extent is friendship important in staff team members’ relationships? What does friendship look like in a church staff team, especially where there are unequal power relations between the different members of the team? What does loving one another look like when we disagree or face low-level conflict with one another? These may be challenging questions to explore openly and honestly, and ones which will need to be revisited periodically as a team matures in its relationships with one another.

3. Possible Implications for Bishops and Their Senior Staff Teams

The focus of this research project has been on the local parish church. However, I consider that the project has implications for bishops in the Church of England and how they lead their senior staff teams and their meetings. The diocese is the key large-scale organisational structure within the Church of England, and each diocese is presided over by a bishop.³⁸⁹ Just as the vicar and staff team have a key role in shaping the culture within the local parish church, so the bishop and his senior staff play a similar role within the diocese. As one experienced member of a bishop’s

³⁸⁹ Davie, *Guide to the Church of England*, p.8

staff has said to me: ‘I am convinced that diocesan change doesn’t happen unless it is modelled by the senior team.’³⁹⁰

It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that the lessons set out above in relation to incumbents and their staff teams might therefore apply equally to bishops and their senior staff teams. Some of the training needs identified in relation to parish ministers may well be equally pertinent to bishops and the members of their senior staff. While bishops and their senior staff will be acutely aware of the episcopal dimension of their ministry, they may be much less aware of how this might need to work out in the minutiae of leading a meeting or facilitating a group, and working with the disagreements that arise.

4. Some Implications for the Work of Bridge Builders

I see two main implications of this research for the work of Bridge Builders, which I currently head up. First, Bridge Builders might benefit from making more explicit some of the theological basis for its work, drawing on the theological themes identified in Chapter V above. This research project has clarified for me that Bridge Builders’ primary focus is in equipping church leaders for some of the episcopal aspects of their ministry, and it would be helpful to use Steven Croft’s model of the three dimensions of ministry to set a context for Bridge Builders’ training.³⁹¹ In addition, much of Bridge Builders’ work can be seen as helping leaders to address what it means to be the body of Christ in the face of differences. This aspect might receive greater emphasis in Bridge Builders’ training, to supplement the existing focus on the practical aspects of working at reconciliation and peacemaking.

Second, Bridge Builders is well placed to respond to some of the training needs identified above. We already have a strong reputation throughout the Church of England (and beyond) for our training work, with a focus on handling conflict. All of the specific skills identified above as important for incumbents and staff team members are covered in our training courses. It would therefore seem appropriate for Bridge Builders to develop a course specifically for incumbents of

³⁹⁰ Revd Canon Dr Roger Matthews, Director for Mission and Ministry, Diocese of Chelmsford, in private email, 18 June 2011

³⁹¹ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*

larger churches and members of their staff team that they could attend as a group. An outline for a possible three-day training course is attached at Appendix 16.

5. Concluding Comments

We have already noted that the church is significant for fulfilling God's mission, and that how the church lives out its internal life speaks directly to the contribution it makes towards that mission. I consider that this is an exciting time to be a minister in the Church of England because we are in 'a period of transition' in part created by the renewed 'centrality of mission' in the life of the church.³⁹² However, this calls for ministers to be equipped for some of the new challenges, including being effective in leading teams and team meetings, and working with disagreement and conflict. This research indicates that ministers and team members need to be adequately equipped and trained for this aspect of their ministry, so that they can fulfil their calling and provide a mature and healthy leadership model for their churches.

³⁹² Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry*, p.199

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Appendix 1

A Survey of Literature on Church Conflict

One of the main starting points for this research project was the author's professional experience with Bridge Builders in engaging with disagreement and conflict in the life of the church, and helping leaders to be able to handle such tensions more effectively. As the project set out to explore how low-level conflict is handled in church life, it therefore seemed appropriate to conduct a survey of the literature currently available on church conflict.

Conflict in the church is a naturally occurring and inevitable phenomenon, and all churches have to deal with conflict. In this sense, conflict is 'normal' in the church. A national survey of over 14,000 congregations in the USA in the year 2000 found that 75% of those congregations had faced some level of what they could clearly identify as conflict in the five years prior to the survey.³⁹³ Although there are no comparable figures for churches in Britain, on the basis of my own experience I would expect the results to be similar.³⁹⁴ So a key question and challenge for our churches is: How do British churches go about dealing with the inevitable conflict that they face, and how can they do so in a more constructive manner?

One of the difficulties in talking about conflict in the church is with our understanding of the word 'conflict' itself. In contemporary conflict studies, 'conflict' is generally defined in broader and more generic terms than the common use of the term in the news media, for example, where the word is typically used to designate violent conflict. One academic definition commonly cited, at least in relation to interpersonal conflict, is that offered by Wilmot and Hocker:

Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals.³⁹⁵

This definition points to certain key elements in an understanding of conflict: that 'struggle' is a key aspect; that it becomes conflict once it is expressed in some way, moving beyond something latent; that it generally involves people who are in some kind of existing relationship and interdependency, which is certainly appropriate when reflecting on the congregational and staff team context in the church; and that people's perceptions – and by implication their misperceptions – are central to the experience of conflict. The definition is however less user-friendly than the simple definition developed by Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and used by Bridge Builders in our training work: 'Conflict equals differences plus tension.'³⁹⁶ Most people recognise that there will inevitably be differences within any group of people. Some of these will be differences which no one is worried about, but there will be other differences which lead to tension in the group. When we are dealing with such tension, then we are dealing with conflict, and the word 'conflict' is used in that sense throughout this dissertation.

³⁹³ Carl S. Dudley, Theresa Zingery and David Breeden, *Insights into Congregational Conflict* (Hartford, CT: Faith Communities Today, Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2007)

³⁹⁴ I have worked as an educator and consultant on church conflict since 1996.

³⁹⁵ William W. Wilmot and Joyce L. Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2001⁶), p.41

³⁹⁶ Schrock-Shenk, 'Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation', p.23

This broader use of the term means that much more is included in what is designated as ‘conflict’ than might otherwise be the case. Such a definition also helps open up the possibility of embracing and positively engaging with the experience of conflict. However, it is important to recognise that many people use the term conflict to refer to something which is seen as destructive and negative.³⁹⁷ Therefore I note that for most people it represents a change to see conflict as something potentially constructive which offers an opportunity for growth and positive change.

In trying to shift perceptions, it is worth reflecting on why conflict is normally perceived so negatively. Carolyn Schrock-Shenk suggests four common misperceptions about conflict.³⁹⁸ First, we often restrict the use of the term conflict to tensions where there are negative elements, and fail to include situations where there is a positive or constructive outcome. Second, we tend to view pain and struggle as negative experiences to be avoided, rather than as inescapable and intrinsic elements in growth and creativity – and, for the Christian, in discipleship. Third, as Christians, we often hold a theology, whether implicit or explicit, that conflict is wrong or sinful, instead of understanding that conflict is neutral and that it is our responses to conflict which may be sinful or godly. (In this respect, conflict is like power – and the two are intrinsically inter-connected). Finally, as Christians we like to think that it should be easy to get along together but, in reality, dealing positively and creatively with our differences in Christian community can be profoundly challenging and demanding:

We have seldom been taught how to be proactive in conflict and to understand that conflict transformation is a deeply spiritual task that demands commitment, discipline, new skills, much practice, and constant vigilance from each of us.³⁹⁹

So a central issue is the question of how we think about conflict. John Paul Lederach offers the challenge to think about conflict in terms of ‘conflict transformation’, rather than the more common ‘conflict resolution’ or ‘conflict management’:

A transformational approach recognizes that conflict is a normal and continuous dynamic within human relationships. Moreover, conflict brings with it the potential for constructive change. Positive change does not always happen, of course. As we all know too well, many times conflict results in long-standing cycles of hurt and destruction. But the key to transformation is a proactive bias toward seeing conflict as a potential catalyst for growth.⁴⁰⁰

Like Lederach, I do not want to pretend that conflict is always positive. Patently this is not the case. At heightened levels of tension, conflict can be particularly destructive. However, it is interesting to note that one US survey of pastors’ experience of conflict indicated that over 90% of pastors recognised that conflict can have positive outcomes. They specifically cited benefits that included greater

³⁹⁷ Dean Tjosvold, ‘Defining Conflict and Making Choices about its Management: Lighting the Dark Side of Organizational Life’, *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 2006, 17(2), pp.87-95

³⁹⁸ Schrock-Shenk, ‘Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation’, pp.33-34

³⁹⁹ Schrock-Shenk, ‘Introducing Conflict and Conflict Transformation’, p.34

⁴⁰⁰ John P. Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003), p.15

wisdom, a better-defined vision for the church, better communication with the congregation, and stronger relationships.⁴⁰¹

Conflict becomes more destructive as it increases in intensity. Speed Leas has provided one framework for naming and identifying the different levels of intensity of conflict in a group.⁴⁰² (There are other models.⁴⁰³) Leas proposes five broad levels of conflict intensity, along with strategies for working with each level. These might be pictured as steps on a staircase, which he designates thus:

Level 1: Problems to Solve. At this level there are real differences between people, but those involved are problem-focused not person-focused. Communication is clear and specific and the people involved want to sort out the problem. This is a normal and entirely healthy level of conflict.

Level 2: Disagreement. At this level people are more concerned with self-protection than problem-solving and may talk mainly with friends about how to deal with an issue. Communication is more generalised and people withhold information they think may be used by those with whom they disagree. Again, it is normal for most churches to experience this level of conflict.

Level 3: Contest. At this level people's objectives shift to winning the argument and coming out on top. There is a win-lose dynamic, and communication becomes more distorted with personal attacks and emotional arguments overshadowing rational argument. It is not unusual for churches to experience this level of conflict – and this is the first level where people may name the dynamic as one of 'conflict', as negative elements become more evident.

Level 4: Fight or Flight. At this level the parties' goal is to hurt or get rid of others, or to leave if they cannot achieve this. Factions have solidified, with identified leaders, and the good of the subgroup, rather than the whole congregation or wider Christian body, becomes their focus. Communication is characterised by blaming, negative stereotyping, self-righteousness and a refusal to take responsibility. It is less common for churches to reach this level of conflict, and once they do so they generally feel stuck, and normally need outside help if the group is to find a way forward together. Church splits can happen at this level, at a local congregational level, or at a larger organisational or denominational level.

Level 5: Intractable. In a church context, this level is perhaps better referred to as 'Holy War' since the conflict is out of the participants' control, and the goal of opposing parties is to destroy one another.⁴⁰⁴ In such situations people see themselves as part of an eternal cause, fighting for universal principles. They will therefore justify any means to achieve the perceived all-important ends.

⁴⁰¹ A survey conducted by *Christianity Today* in 2004: 999 surveys were mailed and 506 were returned, for a response rate of 51%. Results are reported in: John C. LaRue (n.d.), 'Church Conflict' available at www.christianitytoday.com/yc/2006/001/9.80.html [accessed 30/5/11]

⁴⁰² Speed Leas, *Moving Your Church Through Conflict* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1985), pp.17-22

⁴⁰³ For example, the German writer Glasl proposes a nine-level model of conflict escalation. See Friedrich Glasl, *Confronting Conflict: A First-Aid Kit for Handling Conflict* (Stroud: Hawthorn Press, 1999), pp.83-106

⁴⁰⁴ I first heard the framing of this level as 'Holy War' from David Brubaker, who has worked as a church consultant, and is currently on the faculty at Eastern Mennonite University.

Communication is characterised by outright condemnation of others, extreme emotional volatility, compulsiveness, an inability to disengage, and with the issues lost from sight. This is conflict at its most destructive, and at its most destructive can be seen in violent conflicts between different Christian groups. Initial intervention is likely to require separation of the warring parties, some kind of peacekeeping rather than a peacemaking initiative.

By identifying these levels of conflict, Leas helps us to understand some of the complexity that can be involved in working with conflict in the church. Whether we are in the midst of the situation or we are involved in intervening in the conflict, an accurate assessment of the level of intensity is critical. 'If you do not recognise the conflict level then it is likely that what you do will at best be ineffective and at worst be counter-productive. Misjudging the conflict level can do more harm than good.'⁴⁰⁵

In terms of intervening in escalated church conflicts, David Barker has also shown that it is important what conceptual and theological frames interveners – typically, senior church leaders – are using in determining how to approach the conflict.⁴⁰⁶ His UK-based research indicates that the approach taken by senior church leaders in the Church of England and the Methodist Church tends to be highly personal and idiosyncratic. He helpfully proposes seeing conflict as 'holy ground', and offers the image of 'walking in sacred space' as a way of conceptualising the mediator's role in engaging with the conflict. Clarifying the intervener's role in creating, protecting and walking in that sacred space offers the prospect of improving how senior church leaders handle interpersonal conflicts in the church.

However, in most cases the challenge for the local church is not how to sort out a conflict once it has escalated to a high level, but how to deal with everyday conflicts so that they do not escalate. A central problem in dealing with conflict within many churches is a prevailing culture of conflict avoidance and 'niceness'. It is common for people in churches to live by the unwritten rule that: 'Thou shalt be nice. Always be nice.'⁴⁰⁷ This needs to be not just recognised but directly addressed. As Boyd-Macmillan and Savage urge us: 'Challenge, expose and discard the norm of "niceness" that rejects conflict as "non-Christian".'⁴⁰⁸

One piece of British congregational research is of related interest here. Mathew Guest suggests that conflict avoidance can be used as a deliberate strategy to try and maintain unity and harmony in churches where there is significant diversity.⁴⁰⁹ Focusing his analysis on the public preaching at St Michael-le-Belfrey in York, he concluded that this church 'is held together by a discourse which accommodates its various schools of belief while also controlling public utterance so

⁴⁰⁵ Eolene Boyd-Macmillan and Sara Savage, *Transforming Conflict: Conflict Transformation Amongst Senior Church Leaders with Different Theological Stances* (York: Foundation for Church Leadership, 2008), p.76

⁴⁰⁶ David J. Barker, 'Walking in the Space Between: An Exploration of Espoused Theologies and Theologies in Use with Respect to Formal and Informal Approaches to Resolving Interpersonal Conflict in the Methodist and Anglican Churches', unpublished DMin thesis, University of Wales, Lampeter, Wales, 2010

⁴⁰⁷ John P. Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), p.101

⁴⁰⁸ Boyd-Macmillan and Savage, *Transforming Conflict*, p.95

⁴⁰⁹ Mathew Guest, 'Friendship, Fellowship and Acceptance: The Public Discourse of a Thriving Evangelical Congregation' in Mathew Guest, Karen Tusting and Linda Woodhead, *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp.71-84

that conflict is avoided'.⁴¹⁰ He saw this being achieved by, for example, the extensive teaching on the reformed Christian life being kept vague and imprecise, and by avoiding teaching on moral issues or offering 'specific moral prescriptions or sanctions'.⁴¹¹ This allowed the congregation to successfully encompass 'both liberal (open, broad and tolerant) and conservative (narrow, exclusivist) camps, holding each in a deliberate balance, while attempting to compromise neither'.⁴¹² However I would observe that, while there are times when it is appropriate to avoid conflict, conflict avoidance will lead in all likelihood to a build-up of tensions that can explode destructively at a later stage, if it is used as the church's primary or sole strategy. Conflict avoidance also misses out on more creative options for dealing with the tensions and differences within the Christian congregation or wider body.

As well as a pervasive culture of conflict avoidance, when tensions are addressed there are often unhelpful patterns in the ways that people respond in churches (although these patterns are probably not restricted to the church). Speed Leas highlights some of these patterns:

- 'dropping out' by not attending services or stopping financial giving;
- blaming other individuals or groups who have a differing or opposing views to our own;
- attacking others, by questioning their character and motivation, or by starting a campaign or petition; and
- generalising, by moving away from specific matters to sweeping assessments and evaluations of others.⁴¹³

Ron Kraybill identifies a wider range of patterns including:

- leaders discouraging expression of disagreement and urging harmony;
- viewing conflict as wrong, disloyal and something to be avoided at all costs; spiritualising conflict and confusing personal views with God's will;
- blurring issues and people, by not separating the person from their view on an issue;
- communicating only indirectly, for example with friends, and refusing to address issues directly with others;
- hoarding up hurts from the past;
- reacting negatively to others' views, rather than responding thoughtfully;
- focusing on positions and solutions, rather than clarifying process and exploring underlying concerns; and
- not tolerating uncertainty.⁴¹⁴

The participants in a Bridge Builders' Network Day in 2009, comprising seventeen church leaders from six different denominations, working together identified further unhelpful patterns in church life that contribute to poor ways of handling conflict:

⁴¹⁰ Guest, 'Friendship, Fellowship and Acceptance', p.77

⁴¹¹ Guest, 'Friendship, Fellowship and Acceptance', pp.78-79

⁴¹² Guest, 'Friendship, Fellowship and Acceptance', p.81

⁴¹³ Speed Leas, 'The Basics of Conflict Management in Congregations' in David B. Lott (ed.), *Conflict Management in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2001), pp.25-30

⁴¹⁴ Ron Kraybill, 'Habits in Conflict: Divided by Versus Bound Together by Conflict' in Carolyn Schrock-Shenk (ed.) *Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual: Foundations and Skills for Constructive Conflict Transformation* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Conciliation Service, 2000⁴), pp.250-251

- people acquiescing to the dominant voice of key ‘gate keepers’ or of historically dominant families;
- older people (who can be in a majority in some of the older established churches) resisting change, or at least having difficulty accepting change;
- people wanting the church to be a refuge from conflict because they have to deal with so much conflict elsewhere in their lives;
- painful baggage from the past overshadowing present interactions;
- being constrained by structures which do not encourage tensions and concerns to surface until a decision is needed, and a lack of suitable informal processes to explore potentially conflictual issues prior to them being raised on formal meeting agendas; and
- a general defensiveness in people’s approach, rooted in concerns about the church’s survival, due to declining numbers.⁴¹⁵

While only a few of the above range of negative patterns may be restricted to churches, it is worth recognising that there are some particular challenges in engaging with conflict in a church setting which do seem to be specific to the church context. Hugh Halverstadt points to three of these. First, people’s identities are at stake in church conflicts: ‘Spiritual commitments and faith understandings are highly inflammable because they are central to one’s psychological identity.’ Second, the Christian gospel itself is intrinsically volatile, and involved in the business of effecting social and personal change. Third, churches are voluntary institutions ‘whose structures and processes permit and even entice unaccountable uses of power’.⁴¹⁶ I think this last is potentially a particular problem in a community, such as the church, where the broken and needy are welcomed in, and where they may have little opportunity to exercise power and influence elsewhere in their lives.

However, these are not the only challenges of conflict within the church. As I have written elsewhere, there are several other factors which contribute to complex emotional dynamics and a potentially high level of intensity in engaging with conflict in the church, including the following:

- 1) Christian communities function like an extended family, with close personal relationships and struggles over relating to the parental figures in the church;
- 2) The community life of the church has the potential to take on greater significance for those involved in that community because of the breakdown of other social structures in our society, including the family;
- 3) Church members often hold unrealistic and idealised expectations of those in ordained ministry;
- 4) There can be a lack of maturity and personal self-awareness among some of those serving in ordained ministry, which affects their leadership and how they handle conflict;
- 5) There is often a lack of clarity and good process in church decision-making; and, as I have already noted,

⁴¹⁵ Bridge Builders, ‘Current features of the church’s life that contribute to *unhelpful* ways of handling differences, tension and conflict’, unpublished notes from a Bridge Builders’ Network Day in London held on 22 January 2009 at the London Mennonite Centre

⁴¹⁶ Hugh F. Halverstadt, *Managing Church Conflict* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), p.2

- 6) There is a prevailing tendency of Christians to avoid or spiritualise conflict.⁴¹⁷

Some similar points are made by another church consultant, Darrell Puls, who specialises in church conflict. Puls ascribes the complexities of church conflict to a combination of the family-like dynamics of the church combined with it being a large-scale volunteer organisation.⁴¹⁸ He highlights how this combination can lead to a clash of largely unexpressed underlying concerns and expectations.

Linked to these challenges is the tendency for Christian communities to want to hold on to a fantasy, or what Bonhoeffer calls a 'wishful image', of what church life is like.⁴¹⁹ If we are to experience genuine Christian community, Bonhoeffer believes that there is a need to experience and face into a 'great disillusionment' with other Christians and with ourselves.⁴²⁰ Scott Peck expresses a similar view in his exploration of community, where he sees the need for a community to travel through stages of chaos and emptiness in the journey from pseudo-community, where we are simply being nice to one another, to true community, where we can be real with one another.⁴²¹

In seeking to find a path through the above challenges, Halverstadt points to the importance of how Christians engage with one another: 'the key to making church conflicts Christian may be found in fashioning a faith-based process for differing parties to use. *How* Christians behave in conflicts is of critical and spiritual consequence for *what* they seek.'⁴²² As Halverstadt suggests, and as others such as Eolene Boyd-Macmillan have perhaps articulated more clearly, this is going to involve a change in culture for most churches:

Only a comprehensive revamping of how we think about ourselves and others in conflict, both as individuals and groups, along with shifts in our church cultures will 'transform' conflict. The goal is not to get all Christians to agree on everything, but to stop the name-calling, the blaming, the talking past one another, the hatred and spiritual skewering of one another. Our vision is to learn to disagree, perhaps even on matters of truth, in ways that embody the gospel of Truth and set an example for other communities.⁴²³

Alan Kreider and others articulate this change as the need to build a 'culture of peace' in the church, grounded in the biblical vision of *shalom*, which will be a 'distinctive cultural identity growing out of our life in fellowship with Jesus Christ'.⁴²⁴ Kreider et al.'s view, from what might be seen as a liberal evangelical perspective, is shared by some at a more conservative end of the church spectrum. Presbyterian pastor, and chairman of the board of Peacemaker Ministries, Alfred Poirier asserts that 'we tend to assume that peacemaking is meant to be merely corrective and not something constructive. Yet the ministry of reconciliation that

⁴¹⁷ Alastair J. M. McKay, 'What is Distinctive About Church Conflict?' available at www.bbministries.org.uk/articles/what-is-distinctive-about-church-conflict [accessed 30/12/11]

⁴¹⁸ See Darrell Puls (n.d.), 'Mastering the Storm of Church Conflict' available at www.churchhealers.com/Church%20Conflict.htm [accessed 26/12/08]

⁴¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p.35

⁴²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p.35

⁴²¹ M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1987), pp.86-106

⁴²² Halverstadt, *Managing Church Conflict*, p.4

⁴²³ Boyd-Macmillan and Savage, *Transforming Conflict*, p.29

⁴²⁴ Alan Kreider, Eleanor Kreider and Paulus Widjaja, *A Culture of Peace: God's Vision for the Church* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), p.58

God gives us is chiefly to build Christ's people to be peacemakers and his church to be a culture of peace.⁴²⁵

Kreider et al. look at some of the practicalities of developing this culture of peace, and suggest the need for four key *attitudes* and four central *skills*. These are attitudes of vulnerability, humility, commitment to the safety of others, and of hope; and skills of truthful speaking, attentive listening, alertness to community, and community discernment with mutual accountability.⁴²⁶ These attitudes and skills need to be linked to a basic level of self-awareness. This is echoed in one of the earliest British books on church conflict. Pauline Bell and Pauline Jordan affirm that, for conflict to be engaged with creatively, 'there needs to be a certain amount of self-awareness that enables us to recognise our own motives, needs and values, as well as to help others to recognise and give expression to theirs'.⁴²⁷

Kreider et al. also remind us that there is no quick fix to the challenge facing the church. In seeking to change the way conflict is handled within the church, it is important to acknowledge that:

It will not be easy, and the changes required will be numerous. They will take time – because essentially we are looking at a process of cultural change within the church. And such a change of culture can only take place over the medium- to long-term, through a range of strategies sustained over time.⁴²⁸

Much of the work of trying to effect a change in culture has been focused on training individual leaders. This has been the thrust of Bridge Builders' ministry since its foundation in 1996. It was the focus of a chapter I wrote in 2006, published in 2008, in which I set out eighteen 'keys' for church leaders to transform the way they engage with conflict in the church, as part of creating a culture of peace.⁴²⁹ Training individual leaders continues to be a focus of attention, as illustrated by Boyd-Macmillan and Savage's recent work with a disparate group of senior church leaders.⁴³⁰ What needs greater attention is how to develop this culture more widely within both the local church and broader church structures.⁴³¹

So what insights can empirical research on church conflict offer that might inform this exploration? Writing in 1993, Penny Becker and others noted that 'the literature that examines congregational conflict is small', and they observed that 'many questions about the nature and processes of conflict in congregations remain unanswered'.⁴³² Based on my literature searches, the situation has not changed

⁴²⁵ Alfred J. Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), p.14

⁴²⁶ Kreider et al., *A Culture of Peace*, pp.76-91

⁴²⁷ Pauline Bell and Pauline Jordan, *Conflict: Handling Conflict in the Local Church* (London: Scripture Union, 1992), p.149

⁴²⁸ Kreider et al., *A Culture of Peace*, p.91

⁴²⁹ Alastair J. M. McKay, 'Resolving Conflict' in John Nelson (ed.) *How to Become a Creative Church Leader: A Modern Handbook* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008) pp.194-210. (The chapter was originally entitled 'Transforming Conflict' but this was changed by the publisher, without reference to either the author or editor.)

⁴³⁰ Boyd-Macmillan and Savage, *Transforming Conflict*

⁴³¹ One initiative in this area is Peacemaker Ministries' training package, 'The Peacemaking Church'. For further information see Peacemaker Ministries (n.d.)

www.peacemaker.net/site/c.aqKFLTOBIPH/b.2837365/k.65C1/The_Peacemaking_Church.htm
[accessed 12/8/13]

⁴³² Penny E. Becker, Stephen J. Ellingson, Richard W. Flory, Wendy Griswold, Fred Kniss and Timothy Nelson, 'Straining at the Tie That Binds: Congregational Conflict in the 1980s', *Review of Religious Research*, March 1993, 34(3) [193-209], pp.195 & 193

dramatically since then, although there have been some helpful additions to the research literature.

Attempts have been made to try to identify the sources of conflict in congregations. A senior consultant with the Alban Institute, Roy Pneuman, identified nine 'predictable sources of conflict' in the congregations with which he consulted:

- 1) members disagree about values and beliefs;
- 2) the congregation's structure is unclear;
- 3) the pastor's role and responsibilities are in conflict;
- 4) the structure no longer fits the congregation's size;
- 5) the clergy and lay leadership styles do not match;
- 6) the new pastor rushes into changes;
- 7) communication lines are blocked;
- 8) church members manage conflict poorly; and
- 9) disaffected members hold back participation and pledges.⁴³³

Mennonite church consultant David Brubaker notes that Pneuman's proposed sources of conflict can be grouped into three areas: organisational *structure* (items 2, 3 and 4), matters of church *culture* or practice (items 5, 7 and 8), and factors involving *leadership and membership* (items 1, 6 and 9). Brubaker points out that 'Congregational members may indeed be engaged in what they experience as worship wars or power struggles, but these are nested in particular structural, cultural, and environmental contexts'.⁴³⁴

Pneuman's identification of sources of conflict seems to be based on his experience from his years of church consulting. A more solidly research-based assessment is offered by Penny Becker and a group of fellow sociologists. They began by identifying four causes of congregational conflict cited in earlier literature on intra-church conflict: disputes along the liberal/conservative divide; external pressures giving rise to internal conflict by triggering latent fissures; conflict self-consciously generated by central or denominational authorities for their own ends; and disputes having their root in differences between clergy and laity.⁴³⁵ However, in exploring the experience of conflict of a group of seventeen congregations from a single urban neighbourhood, the authors concluded that none of the four causes of conflict suggested in earlier research helped to account for the conflict in the churches they interviewed. Instead the authors identified three broad 'domains' for conflict. First, theology, doctrine, or other ideal issues (which they saw as *cultural* issues); second, resources, such as money, personnel or physical plant (seen as *economic* issues); and third, church authority (seen as *political* or *administrative* issues).⁴³⁶ On the specific substance of the conflicts, they were struck by the diversity of the presenting issues.⁴³⁷

The researchers coded the churches into three broad categories, of liberal, mainstream or conservative, and according to three broad polities, of episcopal, mixed and congregational. These codings offered no conclusive findings,

⁴³³ Roy W. Pneuman, 'Nine Common Sources of Conflict in Churches' in David B. Lott (ed.), *Conflict Management in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2001), pp.45-53

⁴³⁴ David R. Brubaker, *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009), p.3

⁴³⁵ Becker, et al., 'Straining at the Tie That Binds', pp.194-195

⁴³⁶ Becker, et al. 'Straining at the Tie That Binds', p.198

⁴³⁷ Becker, et al. 'Straining at the Tie That Binds', p.200

although the authors noted that conservative churches reported fewer conflicts than moderate and liberal ones, and that episcopal churches reported fewer conflicts than those with congregational or mixed polities. The authors were, however, struck by the frequent mention by interviewees of local church and community history as setting the ground for contemporary conflict. In other words, most could trace some roots of recent conflict in their congregation to their community's past; conflicts in the church are, inevitably, embedded in a wider social and historical context, and are not simply isolated events.

Becker subsequently went on to conduct extensive research with a group of twenty-three congregations in three adjacent urban districts of greater Chicago, exploring the patterns of conflict in these churches.⁴³⁸ Her research ends up having relatively little to say about the functioning of conflict in churches, and her most significant insight is to propose a typology for four different types or models of church life, that she calls 'House of Worship', 'Family', 'Community' and 'Leader'. These four types offer different answers to the two key cultural questions of 'who we are' and 'how we do things around here', with differences, for example, in the nature of community life and corporate witness.⁴³⁹ In my view, her most helpful insight relating directly to conflict is in clarifying two different types of conflict. Drawing on a study of divorce in the USA, she identifies a distinction between '*within-frame* conflict' and '*between-frame* conflict'.⁴⁴⁰ Within-frame conflicts result from a violation of shared expectations, whereas between-frame conflicts result from the clash of two fundamentally different sets of expectations for behaviour. Within-frame conflicts 'can be resolved by routine kinds of processes that enforce compliance with agreed-upon expectations'.⁴⁴¹ This means they are relatively straightforward to deal with. On the other hand, between-frame conflicts are 'more difficult to resolve because the divergent expectations include different ideas about appropriate decision-making processes'. Becker goes on to propose that 'between-frame conflicts in small groups are often fundamentally about identity, an attempt to forge an answer to the implicit questions, "Who are we?" and "How do we do things around here?"'⁴⁴²

Becker's distinction between these two types of conflict is reflected in work on international conflict. Jay Rothman and Marie Olson note that 'it is clear that identity as an analytic tool and focus of global peacemaking continues to grow'.⁴⁴³ Like Becker, they speak of the distinction between within-frame and between-frame conflicts, but they prefer the terms 'interest-based conflicts' and 'identity-based conflicts'. The principal features of interest-based conflicts are that 'Issues are concrete and clearly defined. Desired outcomes are defined in terms of tangible interests and resources. [They] involve relatively agreed upon interpretations of the sources of the conflict and conditions for settlement.' In contrast the features of identity-based conflicts are that 'Issues are abstract, complex, and difficult to define. Desired outcomes are intangible and difficult to identify. [They] involve interpretive dynamics of history, psychology, culture, values, and

⁴³⁸ Penny E. Becker, *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

⁴³⁹ Becker, *Congregations in Conflict*, pp.12-17

⁴⁴⁰ Becker, *Congregations in Conflict*, p.4

⁴⁴¹ Becker, *Congregations in Conflict*, p.4

⁴⁴² Becker, *Congregations in Conflict*, p.4

⁴⁴³ Jay Rothman and Marie L. Olson, 'From Interests to Identities: Towards a New Emphasis in Interactive Conflict Resolution', *Journal of Peace Research*, 2001, **38**(3), pp.289-305

beliefs of groups that are often, at least initially, framed in ways that are mutually exclusive.⁴⁴⁴ The authors point out that ‘What is apparent is that interest-based disputes are by definition amenable to traditional forms of negotiation. Identity-based conflicts, on the other hand, contain primary elements that are non-negotiable.’⁴⁴⁵ As Rothman and Olson’s work indicates, this does not mean that identity-based conflicts cannot be worked with and transformed; however, what they demonstrate is that a distinctly different process of engagement is needed, different from the traditional interest-based and problem-solving approaches promoted by conventional conflict resolution. The alternative is exemplified by John Paul Lederach’s approach to peace-building, with a focus on conflict transformation rather than conflict resolution.⁴⁴⁶

A common view of conflict in churches is that it is directly related to, and a typical response to change in the life of the church. In my training work with church leaders, I frequently hear the view expressed that there is conflict in the church because of people’s difficulties in handling change. David Brubaker’s recent research, in a quantitative study with 100 congregations, has helpfully put this thesis to the test, at least in a North American context.⁴⁴⁷ Brubaker demonstrates that in fact most change does not correlate strongly with conflict. For example, it is commonly held that undertaking new building work will likely lead to conflict in the congregation, but Brubaker’s research does not support this. Other changes, such as expanding ministry in the local community or changing the congregation’s fellowship patterns, correlated more with growth than with conflict.

However, Brubaker found that two types of change do correlate strongly with conflict: changes to the congregation’s decision-making structure, and the addition or removal of a Sunday worship service. He suggests that a possible reason that changing the decision-making structure will lead to conflict is because of ‘the power-mediating and ceremonial role of that structure’.⁴⁴⁸ He also indicates that adding or removing a worship service will likely be conflictual because it will disrupt the primary expression of the ritual and cultural life of the group, and may also reflect a clash of worldviews within the congregation. Brubaker reaches the following conclusions from his research:

Despite ... significant limitations, this research offered or reinforced three significant claims. First, change and conflict are pervasive in religious congregations, even though most changes do not correlate with conflict. Second, the identified issues (what congregations say they fight about) are less significant than underlying structural and systemic issues. Third, the ability to effectively introduce and manage change – in ways consistent with the congregation’s own tradition – is a critical skill set for leaders who desire thriving congregations.⁴⁴⁹

Brubaker’s research highlights that it is the poor way in which change is handled and introduced that mostly accounts for change leading to conflict, rather than the

⁴⁴⁴ Rothman and Olson, ‘From Interests to Identities’, p.297

⁴⁴⁵ Rothman and Olson, ‘From Interests to Identities’, p.297

⁴⁴⁶ John P. Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 1998)

⁴⁴⁷ Brubaker, *Promise and Peril*

⁴⁴⁸ Brubaker, *Promise and Peril*, p.113

⁴⁴⁹ Brubaker, *Promise and Peril*, p.125

change itself. He also shows that only a few changes in church life are inherently likely to lead to conflict.

The above survey of literature on church conflict shows that this is an under-researched area. Most of the research that has been carried out has been in the USA. As far as I could ascertain, no one has looked at low-level, everyday conflict in churches. So the current research project is addressing an area that it seems has not been researched before.

Appendix 2

Categorising and Calculating Church Sizes

1. Rothauge's Categorisation of Churches by Size

The seminal US work on categorising church sizes, in relation to individual congregations, is Arlin Rothauge's *Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry*.⁴⁵⁰ This provides a model on which a range of subsequent church consultants, notably those linked to the influential Alban Institute, have based several works relating to the size of different churches.⁴⁵¹ One of these consultants, Alice Mann, undertook a major project with the Scottish Episcopal Church, part of which used Rothauge's sizing model. I understand that she adapted the sizes downwards to fit the Scottish context.⁴⁵² Two influential English writers on the church and ministry, Steven Croft and Malcolm Grundy, have drawn on, and slightly adapted Rothauge's model for a British context.⁴⁵³

Rothauge designates four sizes of congregation:

- (a) the 'family church' of 0-50 members (which I will call a *family-sized church*);
- (b) the 'pastoral church' of 50-150 members (which I will call a *pastoral-sized church*);
- (c) the 'program church' of 150-350 members (which I will call a *programme-sized church*); and
- (d) the 'corporation church' of over 350 members (which I will call a *corporate-sized church*).

While studying in the USA in the late 1990s, I was alerted by Anil Solanki, a teacher at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, of the need to designate at least a fifth category of church size in the US context, which he called the 'mega church' of over 1,000 members. The category of 'mega church' (or *mega-sized church*, as I will designate it) has now been widely recognised in North America, although the typical threshold used there is 2,000 members, rather than the 1,000 that Solanki proposed to me.⁴⁵⁴

For the purposes of this study of two English churches I will work with a scaling of **150 to 350 members for programme-sized churches, 350 to 1,000 members for corporate-sized churches, and over 1,000 members for mega-sized churches.**

⁴⁵⁰ Arlin Rothauge, *Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry*. (New York, NY: The Episcopal Church Center, 1990)

⁴⁵¹ For example: Alice Mann, *The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transitions in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1998), Alice Mann, *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2001), and Beth Ann Gaede, *Size Transitions in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2001)

⁴⁵² See The Scottish Episcopal Church (n.d.)

www.scotland.anglican.org/index.php/about/history_chapter/8_the_twentieth_century/ [accessed 11/5/11] for a brief overview of the project.

⁴⁵³ Steven Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions: Ordination and Leadership in the Local Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008²), pp.212-217; and Malcolm Grundy, *Understanding Congregations* (London: Mowbray, 1998), pp.28-38

⁴⁵⁴ See the Hartford Institute for Religion Research (n.d.)

<http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html> [accessed 12/8/13].

This broadly follows Croft's example on the sizing of programme-sized churches.⁴⁵⁵ Neither Croft nor Grundy makes any proposals for the size banding of corporate-sized churches in Britain, nor do they make any reference to mega-sized churches, although they both adjust downwards the band figures for family-sized and pastoral-sized churches to fit a British context.

I took a decision early on to exclude mega-sized churches (such as Holy Trinity, Brompton) from my research project, in the expectation that access to the staff teams of such churches would be difficult to secure, due to their high profile.

2. McIntosh's *Simpler Categorisation Model*

Although widely referenced, Rothauge's model is not the only one. A simpler alternative model is offered by Gary McIntosh, with three categories:⁴⁵⁶

- (a) '*small church*' of 15-200 members, with a relational orientation;
- (b) '*medium church*' of 200-400 members, with a programmatic orientation; and
- (c) '*large church*' of over 400 members, with an organisational orientation.

(Although he does not offer it, a fourth size of 'mega church', of over 2,000 members, could easily be incorporated.)

While McIntosh's model has the attraction of simplicity and avoidance of jargon, the differences between a family-sized and pastoral-sized church are lost. As Rothauge illustrates, the distinction between how these two different size churches operate is significant.⁴⁵⁷ Given the number of family- and pastoral-sized churches in England and Britain, Rothauge's model, with the addition of the mega-sized church, provides a better one for the British context, hence presumably why both Croft and Grundy were comfortable adopting it. Some of the work on the distinctive nature of family-sized churches would seem to support this approach.⁴⁵⁸

3. *Calculating Congregational Size in the Church of England*

In his study Rothauge refers to church 'members' and is concerned with 'active membership' which he proposes is calculated according to 'the average attendance at worship over a one-year period'.⁴⁵⁹ How 'members' is defined in the Church of England is problematic.

In his case study exploration of St Michael-le-Belfrey in York, Matthew Guest offers three ways of measuring the size of an Anglican congregation:⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁵ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, p.214

⁴⁵⁶ Gary L. McIntosh, *One Size Doesn't Fit All: Bringing Out the Best in Any Size Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1999)

⁴⁵⁷ Rothauge, *Sizing Up a Congregation*, pp.3-16

⁴⁵⁸ See, for example, Martin Robinson and Dan Yarnall, *Celebrating the Small Church* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch, 1993)

⁴⁵⁹ Rothauge, *Sizing Up a Congregation*, p.1

⁴⁶⁰ Matthew Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture: A Congregational Study in Innovation* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), p.62

- (a) *the electoral roll*: which records those who have signed up to be on the roll, with eligibility being residence in the parish or attendance at the church services for more than six months;
- (b) *the service register*: which records the number of communicants, as noted by the presiding priest at the relevant services, which in a large church would probably be counted by one or more vergers or sidespeople; and
- (c) *the address list or database*: which records all those on the church's records who are in some way deemed active participants in or connected to the congregation, at a particular period in time.

For the purposes of my study, **I will take the term 'members' to apply to the average size of the regular worshipping congregation of adults participating in a church's Sunday services of worship.** This is close to Guest's service register method.

Appendix 3

Research Project Overview

**CASE STUDY OF TWO
CHURCH STAFF
TEAMS**

A Research Project
with Larger Evangelical Churches
in the Diocese of London

June 2009

CASE STUDY OF TWO CHURCH STAFF TEAMS

A Research Project with Larger Evangelical Churches in the Diocese of London

THE RESEARCHER

Alastair McKay serves as Director of Bridge Builders at the London Mennonite Centre. Alastair co-founded Bridge Builders in 1996, and has been the full-time Director since 1999. He is 45 years old, British and a member of St James' Church, Muswell Hill. He has been studying for a Doctorate of Ministry (DMin) since September 2005 through Spurgeon's College in South London, a Baptist seminary which offers training for mission and ministry.

Bridge Builders seeks to transform the culture of how conflict is handled in churches in Britain, primarily through providing training for church leaders and their congregations and denominations. Bridge Builders also offers mediation and consultancy services to churches and their leaders. The London Mennonite Centre, located in Highgate in North London is a resource centre for British churches focussed on promoting faithful Christian discipleship. Further information on Bridge Builders and Alastair McKay is available at www.menno.org.uk/bridgebuilders.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Alastair's DMin research project is focussed on the functioning of ministry staff teams of broadly evangelical Anglican parishes with larger congregations, in the Diocese of London. In particular he is interested in how the team members interact with one another when there is some discernable disagreement within the group (i.e. low-level "conflict" as he uses the term), and the team members' theological understanding regarding how they function together when there is disagreement.

This focus will be explored through working with two case studies, i.e. two different staff teams of two large churches.

Two research methods will be used: participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

SUPPORT FOR THE PROJECT

The project has the support of the Bishops in the Diocese of London, and also of the Archdeacons, who have helped by identifying which churches might fall within the parameters that Alastair has set for the research project.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions for this DMin project are:

1. How do the ministry staff teams of larger (i.e. programme-sized, upwards) Anglican churches in the Diocese of London deal with their differences and tensions – i.e. with conflict, as so defined – within the team, particularly in the context of decision-making? (Programme-sized = over 150 active members.)
2. How far can the way that the ministry staff team deals with differences and tensions be explained by the “conflict style” of the primary leader and/or by the “communication styles” of all the team members?
3. What is the stated theology of staff team members in relation to how they engage with their differences and disagreement, and in what ways might this differ from the theology that can be inferred from observing their practice?
4. To what extent, if any, do staff team members view their engagement with differences and disagreement as a task of Christian discipleship with theological implications?
5. How do the findings of the field research relate to wider understandings of Anglican evangelical ecclesiology?

RESEARCH AIMS AND PURPOSES

The aims and purposes of the research include:

- A. To shed some light on the culture of how disagreement is handled in two particular church staff teams, and on how team members view their engagement with disagreement theologically.
- B. To inform theological reflection on conflict (broadly defined as “differences plus tension”) in the life of the Church, and on Bridge Builders’ work and ministry serving the Church in transforming conflict.
- C. To be useful to the two case study teams, shedding light on their functioning as a team, and hopefully enabling them to work better as a team in future.
- D. To provide information, insights and ideas that may be useful to other ministry staff teams in the Church of England, and hopefully similar teams from churches in other mainline Protestant denominations in Britain.
- E. To enable Bridge Builders to develop training resources and intervention services that better meet the needs of larger churches and their staff in Britain.

In terms of wider purpose, the aim is:

- F. To enable the Church to live out its life faithfully as it participates in God's ongoing mission in the world. The overarching purpose is therefore missional.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Although there is no certainty about the outcomes of the project, Alastair hopes that the benefits of the research will include:

1. That the project will help raise greater self-awareness and mutual understanding within each of the staff teams that participates in the research, thus leading to better functioning of each team.
2. That the project will open a new door for those involved in church leadership into understanding of God's work in the world through the Church.
3. That the project may prove a gift to the wider church, and contribute to the future health and spiritual growth of church staff teams, and to the effectiveness of the Church in fulfilling God's mission in the world.

PROCESS FOR IDENTIFYING THE CASE STUDIES

The Archdeacons have helped identify a number of broadly evangelical churches in the Diocese of London that seem to meet Alastair's minimum size criteria of 150 active members (i.e. the number of regular worshippers).

Alastair is an active member in one of these churches, St James', Muswell Hill. As he is the researcher conducting the project, St James' will be excluded from being one of the case studies for the research – although several elements of the research will be tested out with the St James' staff team, with the agreement of the incumbent, Revd Kim Swithinbank, and his colleagues.

Alastair will be contacting incumbents in June and July 2009, initially by email with copies of this document, and then following up with a telephone call.

If the initial telephone conversation is fruitful, then Alastair will arrange a visit to meet the full staff team (or possibly initially just the incumbent). After this meeting, it will hopefully become clear both to Alastair and the staff team whether that team might form one of the case studies, or at least to make it onto a short list.

It is worth noting that as the focus of the research is on how staff teams deal with disagreement and low level conflict, Alastair is therefore seeking staff teams that are functioning reasonably well, and are not currently facing serious struggles or crisis.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Once the two case study staff teams have been identified, hopefully by the end of September 2009 at the latest, then the following are expected to be the key steps of the research process:

1. Establishment of formal consent of the staff in the two teams to be the object of research for the case studies, including establishment of the confidentiality and other ethical boundaries.
2. Beginning at an agreed point in the autumn of 2009, ongoing researcher observation by Alastair of the two staff team meetings over a period of possibly three to six months, depending on the frequency of the team meetings, and the number of meetings that Alastair is able to attend in the period. Alastair will be a non-contributing participant observer, taking a few notes during the meeting, and then writing up more extensive notes after the meeting. These notes will provide a primary data resource, and Alastair will carry out ongoing analysis of his observation notes and journaling during the course of the research.
3. About mid-way through the participant observation process, Alastair will make a brief temporary shift in role into a training capacity, which will involve:
 - a) the incumbent completing two conflict style instruments, and Alastair holding a private session to help him or her to interpret the results; and
 - b) all the team members completing a communication style instrument, and Alastair holding a training session to help them to interpret the results.After completion of this work, Alastair will resume his role as a participant observer, with the subsequent observation being conducted in the light of the style profiling results.
4. Following the conclusion of the participant observation of team meetings, hopefully before Easter 2010, Alastair will conduct a semi-structured interview with each of the incumbents, and with one other staff member of the team; followed by a semi-structured group interview of the whole staff team. All six interviews (four individual ones, and two group ones) will then be transcribed and analysed.
5. The results of the research project will be presented to each of the two case study teams (or possibly jointly together), in the summer or autumn of 2010. With the consent of the two case study teams, a different presentation might possibly be offered to a wider group, e.g. to representatives from the teams of other larger Anglican churches in the Diocese of London and any senior diocesan staff who might be interested.
6. Finally, there will be a follow up pastoral visit to each of the case study teams, to check how the teams have been affected by involvement in the research project, and to reflect on ways in which team functioning may have been improved.

COSTS OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The principal cost to the staff teams will be in their time given to the project, and some (hopefully minor) level of disruption to their normal working as a result of having a participant observer in their midst. There will be a small financial cost in purchasing the conflict and communication style instruments that will be administered half-way through the observation process. In June 2009 the costs of these were:

Susan K. Gilmore and Fraleigh, Patrick W. *The Friendly Style Profile for Communication at Work* (Eugene, OR: Friendly Press, 2004⁴) – cost £10.50 per person. One copy will be required for each member of the staff team.

Ron Kraybill *Style Matters: The Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory* (Harrisonburg, VA: Riverhouse ePress, 2008 edition) – cost £9.25. One copy will be required for the incumbent.

Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (Mountain View, CA: CPP Inc, 2002) – cost £16.50. One copy will be required for the incumbent.

These booklets will be supplied by Metanoia Book Service, a service of the London Mennonite Centre (see: www.metanoiabooks.org.uk), unless agreement is reached otherwise. (The costs at the time of purchase may be different due to changes in exchange rates.)

Alastair is self-financing his DMin research studies, and there will be no charge for any of his time during the research project. If at the close of the project the staff team chooses to invite their church to make a donation to Bridge Builders, then that will be left to the staff team to initiate; there is no expectation that such a donation will be forthcoming.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER REGARDING INVOLVEMENT AND TIMING

Prospective staff teams who might be involved in the project will want to ask themselves a range of questions about participating in the project, which may include:

- 1) Whether they can support the aims and purposes of the research project, and can see value in the possible benefits;
- 2) Whether they are interested in the research questions, and in helping to provide answers to them;
- 3) Whether they are willing for their church to be identified as participating in the research project;
- 4) Whether the timing of the project will work for them as a team; and
- 5) Whether they can trust Alastair McKay as a confidential researcher (which will take at least an initial meeting to establish).

Appendix 4

Identification of the Case Study Teams

The process of securing the participation of two staff teams for the case studies proved harder work and more challenging than foreseen. This Appendix describes the protracted process of identifying suitable case study teams.

The primary data-gathering method of participant observation, as set out in the original research proposal, was refined through some preliminary testing and exploration with the staff team of St James's Church, Muswell Hill, London, a 'corporate-sized' Anglican church where I am a member.⁴⁶¹ This involved an initial meeting with the vicar on 2 April 2009 to explain the project, and then a meeting with the senior staff team, a group of nine, on 28 April 2009. These meetings were helpful as a way of practising my introduction and pitch to a staff team, and in alerting me to some of the anxieties that they might have about participating in the project – most of which had been anticipated. These meetings highlighted the need to produce a short overview paper about the project, instead of offering the formal research proposal. The vicar also helpfully offered a warning to expect some difficulty in getting staff teams to participate in the project.

At the same time, in April 2009, the process began of trying to identify possible suitable ministry staff teams for the case studies. This started with the compilation of an initial list of corporate-sized Evangelical Anglican churches in the Diocese of London, based on my existing knowledge along with some suggestions from one of the archdeacons. This archdeacon proved to be a key link person and advocate for me, and wrote to the senior staff team of the diocese (i.e. the bishops, archdeacons and other senior staff) to seek their support for the research project. This support was granted at the Bishop of London's staff meeting at the end of April 2009. It enabled me legitimately to say that the research project had the support of the bishops in the diocese, when contacting incumbents of prospective churches.

The other archdeacons offered corrections and additions to the provisional list of corporate-sized churches, and also suggested several deletions, as some of the churches included did not reach the require threshold of 350 adult members. From early June 2009 contact was made with the incumbents of the nine churches on the list – although, as it turned out, only eight of these proved to meet the 350-member threshold for corporate-sized churches. Initial contact was made by email, which was then followed up by a telephone call. St James's, Muswell Hill, where I am a member, was excluded on the basis that the research project could unhelpfully complicate my relationship with the staff there. Also excluded were three mega-sized churches, on the basis that access to their staff teams was likely to be especially difficult due to their high public profile.

By early July it was clear that it was going to be difficult to find two staff teams from corporate-sized churches to participate in the research. Only one of the eight, St Thomas's, responded positively, with the response from another being delayed for reasons not easy to establish.⁴⁶² In two cases, the timing was problematic for the church: at one, the vicar was on sabbatical; at the other, the vicar – who was keen to participate – was only starting in post when the observation

⁴⁶¹ See Alastair J. M. McKay, 'Doctorate of Ministry dissertation research proposal', essay submitted towards a DMin degree, Spurgeon's College, London, May 2009

⁴⁶² Like all the names, St Thomas's is a pseudonym.

process would need to begin. In two other cases the vicar was not interested, one not giving any reasons, the other complaining that he was too busy to be able to cope with taking anything else on. In another case there was no response either to emails or phone messages, seeming to indicate that the vicar was not interested. Lastly, one vicar was keen to participate, but following discussion with his staff team found that they were not open to involvement. In part this was because there were going to be some changes in the make-up of the team in the following couple of months. This vicar did however provide some helpful feedback. He identified three generic concerns that he could see with the project. First, he thought that there was a widespread suspicion about fly-on-the-wall-type documentaries and reality television shows, which could contribute to making people uncomfortable with the idea of being observed by an outside researcher. Second, there was a general suspicion of social science approaches in Evangelical circles, at least as he perceived it, with social theory not being seen as ‘properly theological’ or ‘spiritual’. Third, he considered that there was a weakness in the outline proposal, which did not give an adequate sense of how the fruit of the project could be useful and beneficial to others in the wider church. This last point caused me to revise the short introductory document, into the version attached at Appendix 3.

At this stage I was left wondering whether it would be necessary to reconsider the decision to use two case studies, and instead to limit the project to a single case study. The alternative was to widen the net to include programme-sized churches. As the arguments for having two case studies remained unchanged, as set out above, this alternative seemed the best avenue to explore. Having contacted the archdeacons again to check and correct an expanded group, a list of twelve further churches to approach was developed. Contact was also made with the two archdeacons concerned for their help in reaching the incumbents of the two corporate-sized churches who had so far not responded. In one case the archdeacon offered to contact the vicar of this church, St Peter’s, and to encourage him to consider participating.

Instead of contacting all twelve of the new group of programme-sized churches at once, approaches were made first to the larger ones, which seemed to have larger staff groups judging from their websites. Relatively quickly the vicar of one of these churches, All Saints, responded positively. It turned out that he knew of Bridge Builders’ ministry from his participation in the CPAS Arrow leadership course.⁴⁶³ (Bridge Builders leads a one-day introductory workshop on handling conflict as part of that course, and he said that he had found this one of the most helpful elements of the Arrow course.) In consequence, he was favourably disposed towards Bridge Builders’ ministry and thus to the research project.

Of this additional group of programme-sized churches, one of the vicars never responded, while another refused participation without giving any reason. Another church proved unviable, as the vicar had just been appointed to an episcopal role in another diocese, and the church had already entered a pastoral vacancy. Another vicar, known to me personally, explained that he was about to move post, and so the church would be entering a time of pastoral vacancy at the time the observation process would begin. In another case, the vicar was keen on participating, but it emerged that his staff team only met once a month, which was not sufficiently frequent to fit the timescale of the research project.

⁴⁶³ For further information see www.cpas.org.uk/events-and-programmes/equipping-leaders/arrow-leadership-programme [accessed 3/5/11]

This stage of the process was taking longer than planned, as I had wanted to finalise the case study teams before the end of July. However, by that date I was able to meet with the staff team of All Saints, which then comprised a group of six (my minimum preferred size): the vicar, a curate, an administrator, a minister in training, a youth worker, and a children's worker. The vicar kindly invited me to lunch with him beforehand, which gave him an opportunity to get to know me and to ask various questions. As proposed in advance, once the staff meeting started, they ran 40 minutes of their normal agenda, to get a little taste of having me observing them, before turning to focus on me and the research project.

This meeting proved tougher than expected and, after my initial presentation, I came in for a grilling with a barrage of questions – mostly from the staff team, rather than from the vicar. There were a number of concerns about being identified as individuals, and this highlighted that preserving their individual anonymity would be important. They wanted (quite reasonably) to have an idea of the content of what might be written up, and to know what confidentiality boundaries my supervisor would keep. They wanted to know how I would deal with meeting someone whom they had discussed within a team meeting – which I took to be a question testing my own confidentiality boundaries. They also wanted clarification of what I meant by the term 'conflict', and needed reassurance that my interest was in low-level disagreement, not in major clashes or relationship breakdowns. They sought further information on my background and my reasons for being interested in this particular research project. It was important that I modelled responding non-anxiously to all of their questions, taking each one seriously and providing an adequate response. It was also helpful that I affirmed a point made by the vicar, which was about the need for the whole team to be on board with the project if they were to participate.

By the end of our discussion, which lasted about an hour, I was not left with any strong sense that they would be willing to participate, although it appeared that I had been able to satisfy most of their questions. I was therefore both pleased and relieved to hear from the vicar, two weeks after our meeting, that the whole staff team was willing to participate in the project. At that point I confirmed the desire to work with All Saints as one of the two case studies.

Also by the end of July a meeting was set up with the staff team of St Thomas's in late August; and a response was finally received from the vicar of St Peter's indicating that he and his staff team were open to meeting with me, although this could not be scheduled until the end of September, as their team meetings were suspended from August until the middle of September, because of the summer holidays.

The meeting in late August with the staff team of St Thomas's was similar in length to the All Saints one, and some similar issues were raised. The team of five people comprised the vicar, two associate vicars, a curate, and a youth worker. (For unexplained reasons, the parish administrator was not part of the team meetings. This was atypical for the staff teams under consideration.) They had concerns about anonymity and confidentiality of pastoral situations and conflicts within the wider parish. They wanted the chance to comment on what was reported in the dissertation, and to have any disagreements with my analysis recorded within the dissertation. They had a question about whether and how to inform the PCC, should they end up participating in the project. The vicar helpfully summarised that they would need to weigh up the costs of being exposed against the possible learning and insight that could emerge. They offered some initial positive feedback before

my departure, and then they discussed my presentation and responses to their questions after this. I was encouraged when the vicar emailed later that day to say that ‘whilst there is naturally still some low level of anxiety about what you may think of us (!)’, they wanted to participate in the project if I considered them a suitable team to work with. I did have one or two reservations, especially about the smaller size of the team, but held off reaching any conclusion until the meeting with the third team, at St Peter’s.

The third and final meeting with a prospective staff team was held not until the end of September. The team of eight at St Peter’s comprised the vicar, two associate vicars, a curate, the youth worker, the children’s worker, a pastoral worker, and the senior administrator. I met with the team during the course of one of their away days, when they did longer-term strategic planning, and discussed bigger topics or issues than they covered in their weekly staff meetings. Although I arrived early, they greeted me warmly and then immediately invited me to observe, without any further introductions on either side. I was encouraged that the group seemed so comfortable with being observed, and was able to proceed as normal, without any apparent self-consciousness. After observing for a little over half an hour, the vicar invited me to make my presentation, and to field their questions.

Overall there were fewer questions than from the other two teams, which seemed to indicate a lower overall level of anxiety. The strongest reservation was expressed by one of the associate vicars, who was concerned that participation could cost them personally and could be uncomfortable because some of their vulnerabilities might be opened up through the project. I affirmed that it was worth being realistic about the possible costs of involvement. The vicar worked hard to ensure that everyone expressed their own view, although he did not express a view himself – that is until the end, when he provided a summary of their questions, and indicated that that they were all supportive and would be glad to be included as one of the case studies. (This conclusion was potentially premature, as they had not yet had an opportunity to discuss participation without me present. Neither did the vicar check whether there were any reservations that had not yet been expressed.)

On the way out, accompanied by the vicar, I hinted to him my likely preference to work with his team over one of the other teams under consideration because of the size of their team. (There were eight members of the St Peter’s team, while only five at St Thomas’s.) My assessment was that I would be less visible in a larger group, and that they would therefore be less conscious of my presence; this was certainly my experience from a comparison between the St Thomas’s staff and the St Peter’s staff meetings of the short initial observation periods prior to my presentation. Further, the make-up of the All Saints and St Peter’s teams were more similar than the St Thomas’s one, and this would make comparisons easier. On the other hand St Thomas’s team was more theologically diverse, which could be interesting in exploring how they handled disagreement. On balance, I was glad when the next day the senior administrator confirmed that the St Peter’s team was willing to participate. I then indicated that I would like to work with them as my other case study.

Overall the process of securing the participation of the two staff teams proved harder work and more challenging than foreseen. It was therefore with relief and gratitude that I was eventually able to identify three possible teams, and could then select the two most fitting ones that were most alike in size and composition.

Appendix 5

Informed Consent Form for the Research Project: *Case Study of Two Church Staff Teams*

My name is Alastair McKay. I am doing a research project with the working title *Case Study of Two Church Staff Teams: A Research Project with Larger Evangelical Churches in the Diocese of London*. The project is being carried out as part of my Doctorate of Ministry studies at Spurgeon's College, 189 South Norwood Hill, London, SE25 6DJ. My research supervisor is the Revd Dr Nigel Wright, who is the Principal of Spurgeon's College.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project, as a member of one of the two church staff teams. Should you have any questions during the course of the project, I can be contacted either at home (by preference) or alternatively at work, and my contact details are:

<u>Home:</u> [contact details given]	<u>Work:</u> [contact details given]
--	--

At the outset of the project I would like to emphasise the following elements:

- a. your participation in the project is voluntary;
- b. while the names of the church and its Vicar will be given in my doctoral dissertation, no other names of staff members will be used, and I will seek to ensure anonymity of staff members as far as possible in the way that I report my observations of staff exchanges and interactions, or responses to interviews (recognising that this anonymity cannot be guaranteed);
- c. I will maintain confidentiality of what I hear during my observation of the staff team, especially concerning any sensitive pastoral issues. If such issues are reported (for example, because there is disagreement about how to handle the issue) then they will only be reported in a generalised way to ensure that the situation and the people involved cannot be identified. I expect that I will only discuss difficult issues that I might need to process myself with my research supervisor, Nigel Wright, or possibly my external work supervisor, Sandy Bagnall, a qualified counsellor in Harlow, Essex, both of whom are bound to strict confidentiality in their respective roles; and
- d. I welcome you raising any concerns that you might have about the project directly with me; or, if you do not feel able to do so, then with the Vicar. At the Vicar's initiative, the staff team may withdraw from the research project at any time, if the Vicar concludes that I am not able to adequately address any concerns that have arisen.

Please sign this form to show that I have read the contents to you, and that you have understood them. (I will keep the signed copy, and leave you an unsigned copy.)

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 6

Informed Consent Form for Interviews for the Research Project: *Case Study of Two Church Staff Teams*

My name is Alastair McKay. I am doing a research project with the working title *Case Study of Two Church Staff Teams: A Research Project with Larger Evangelical Churches in the Diocese of London*. The project is being carried out as part of my Doctorate of Ministry studies at Spurgeon's College, 189 South Norwood Hill, London, SE25 6DJ. My research supervisor is the Revd Dr Nigel Wright, who is the Principal of Spurgeon's College.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project, as a member of one of the two church staff teams involved. Should you have any questions during the course of the project, I can be contacted either at home (by preference) or alternatively at work, and my contact details are:

<u>Home:</u> [contact details given]	<u>Work:</u> [contact details given]
--	--

This is the second stage of the research project, in which I am conducting selected interviews. I would like to clarify the following elements:

- a. the research project is exploring how church staff teams deal with disagreement in team meetings. The purpose of this interview is to help me understand how you see your staff team meetings, and to explore your understanding of how you deal with disagreement and low-level conflict within your staff meetings;
- b. your participation in the project, including in this interview, is voluntary;
- c. apart from my research supervisor, Nigel Wright, my examiners and a professional transcriber, I am the only person who will have access to the interview recording and transcript;
- d. I have decided to anonymise the two churches whose staff teams I am researching, in order to reduce the chance of readers working out who might have made any comments. So I will not give the names of the two participating churches and their incumbents anywhere in the write-up of the research, and instead will create fictional names;
- e. I will not identify any of my interviewees by name, although I may refer, for example, to a person's role or gender if that seems significant in relation to a particular comment.
- f. I will record the interview on a digital voice recorder, and will make handwritten notes during the interview.

Please sign this form to show that I have read the contents to you, that you have understood them, and that you give your permission to the interview being recorded. (I will keep the signed copy, and leave you an unsigned copy.)

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 7

Observation Schedule for the Research Project: Case Study of Two Church Staff Teams

(Note: font sized reduced here for formatting purposes)

Church: _____
 Date: _____
 Chair: _____
 Start time: _____
 End time: _____

Agenda item:	No disagreement	Disagreement
1. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

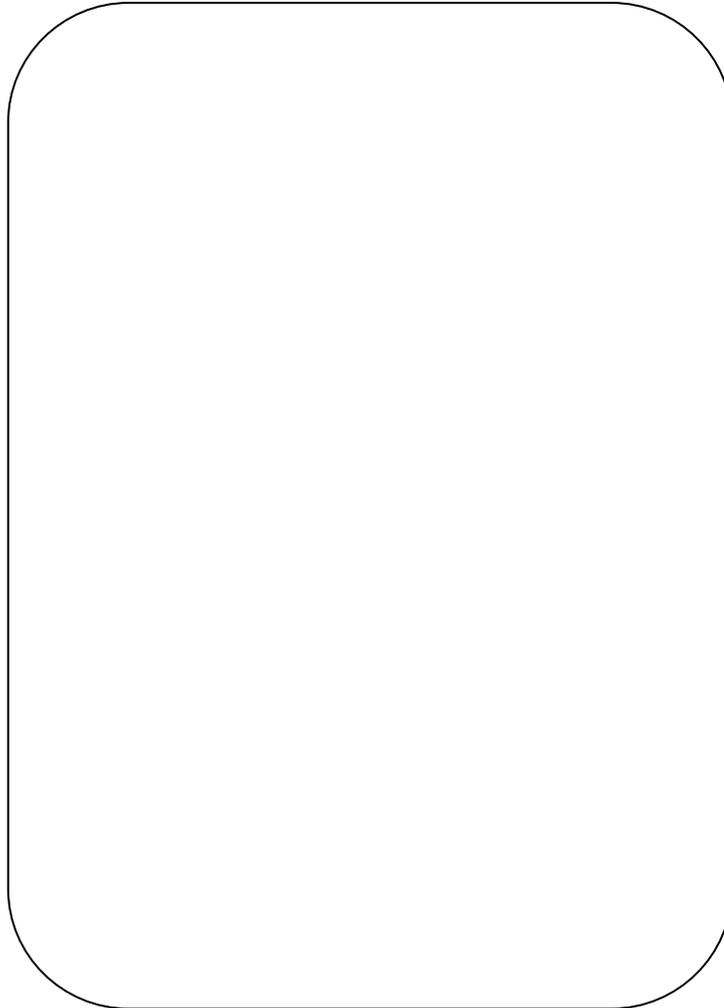
Did the chair:

- Establish the meeting agenda** at the outset: _____
- Solicit a range of views** on each issue, esp. from those who not yet spoken: _____
- Keep the discussion focussed on one issue**, when another was drawn in: _____
- Show flexibility to revisit an earlier item** in light of new concerns: _____
- Use a period of silence or prayer to assist decision-making:** _____

**Observation schedule for research project:
Case Study of Two Church Staff Teams**

Church: _____
Date: _____
Chair: _____

Seating



Appendix 8

Schedule of Observations of the Staff Meetings at the two case study churches (showing researcher journal entries):

St Peter's: (Journal entries shown in brackets)

1. **19 October 2009 (STP1)**
[26 October: half-term, and away on holiday, so could not observe]
2. **2 November (STP2)**
3. **9 November (STP3)**
[16 November: preparing for BB course, so could not observe]
4. **23 November (STP4)**
5. **30 November (STP5)**
[7 December: attending a training workshop, so could not observe]
6. **14 December (STP6)**
7. **21 December (STP7)**
[28 December: no staff meeting]
8. **4 January 2010 (mid-way point – distributed Gilmore-Fraleigh style profiles) (STP8)**
9. **11 January (presentation of Gilmore-Fraleigh styles overview and cards) (STP9)**
10. **18 January (STP10)**
[25 January: St Peter's staff quiet day, no staff meeting, hence no observation]
[1 February: cancelled observation due to BB workload]
11. **22 February (STP11)**
[1 March: cancelled observation due to BB workload]
12. **8 March (STP12)**
[15 March: not present but part of meeting recorded]
13. **22 March (9:00am-3:00pm planning day) (STP13)**
14. **29 March (recorded meeting & contributed some brief observations and content to the meeting, as part of an item reviewing the staff meetings) (STP14)**

All Saints: (Journal entries shown in brackets)

1. **12 November 2009 (AS1)**
[19 November: leading BB course, so could not observe]
[26 November: leading BB workshop, so could not observe]
2. **3 December (AS2)**
3. **10 December (AS3)**
4. **17 December (AS4)**
[24 & 31 December: no staff meetings]
5. **7 January 2010 (assumed mid-way point – distributed G-F style profiles) (AS5)**
6. **14 January (AS6)**
7. **20 January (planning day – presentation of G-F styles overview & cards) (AS7)**
[21 January: leading BB workshop, so could not observe]
[28 January: leading BB workshop, so could not observe]
8. **4 February (AS8)**
[11 February: leading BB course, so could not observe]
[18 February: half-term, and no staff meeting held]
9. **25 February (AS9)**
10. **4 March (AS10)**
11. **10 March (9:30-2:45 planning day: shifted role to participant intervener, and part recorded) (AS11)**
[11 March: had attended previous day, so did not observe]
[18 March: leading BB course, so could not observe]
12. **25 March (continued participant intervener role, and recorded) (AS12)**
13. **1 April (continued participant intervener role, and recorded) (AS13)**

Appendix 9

Friendly Style Profile Scores of Team Members

Number in top left of box = score for that style in “calm”

Number in bottom right of box = score for that style in “storm”

	Accommodating -Harmonising	Analysing- Preserving	Achieving- Directing	Affiliating- Perfecting
St Peter's Church				
Vicar	24 / 25	23 / 27	36 / 26	17 / 22
Associate vicar (male)	20 / 22	24 / 24	36 / 32	20 / 22
Associate vicar (female)	27 / 24	19 / 28	28 / 23	26 / 25
Senior administrator	21 / 20	28 / 24	22 / 29	29 / 27
Youth worker	29 / 26	19 / 24	33 / 22	19 / 28
Pastoral worker	28 / 36	19 / 20	23 / 20	30 / 24
Children's worker	33 / 33	17 / 25	26 / 16	24 / 26
Curate (until end 2009)	33 / 24	21 / 24	16 / 22	30 / 30
All Saints Church				
Vicar	24 / 30	20 / 19	30 / 31	26 / 20
Curate	21 / 24	16 / 20	32 / 32	31 / 24
Administrator	25 / 24	32 / 24	24 / 29	19 / 23
Youth worker	24 / 21	21 / 19	34 / 27	21 / 33
Children's worker	14 / 18	25 / 26	32 / 29	29 / 27
Minister in training (revised)	26 / 27	19 / 18	29 / 25	26 / 30
Project worker	21 / 17	25 / 19	26 / 28	28 / 36
Alastair McKay	25 / 23	14 / 15	39 / 34	22 / 28

Appendix 10

An Overview of the Four Gilmore-Fraleigh Friendly Styles

Accommodating-Harmonising	
Personal purpose	To help others and to see them happy; to have fun; to avoid disapproval or censure
Possible Mottos/ Favourite Sayings	“You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar” “Peace at any price” “When in Rome, do as Romans do”
Pace & intensity	Quick and responsive, low intensity
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sees others’ point of view - Can subordinate own preferences to resolve conflict - Will spend time to find win/win solution to problems - Very flexible and adaptable - Light touch and sense of humour; avoids situation getting overly serious - Puts people before task - Genuinely pleased when others are happy - Quick to forgive and forget
Excesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Loses track of personal goals in deference to others - Avoids conflict at all costs - Says “Yes” when means “No” to get pressure off - Is wishy-washy, unreliable and inconsistent - Can be silly or inappropriate - Can lose track of the task and fail to meet deadlines
Analysing-Preserving	
Personal purpose	To be safe and certain; to avoid foolishness and failure on the road to success
Possible Mottos/ Favourite Sayings	“Look before you leap” “Better to be safe than sorry” “If it’s not broken, don’t fix it”
Pace & intensity	Slow and steady, low intensity
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Willing to pore over the detail before taking action - Knows value of tried and tested methods - Won’t get caught up in impractical scheme - Completes on time and keeps track of time - Will forego expression of own feelings for sake of progress - Rarely confrontational - Enjoys sorting data
Excesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis-paralysis: inflexible and indecisive - Unwilling to try new things - Pessimistic and suspicious - Preoccupied with time - Overwhelmed by emotionality in others - Can be cold or aloof - Can overwhelm others with details

Achieving-Directing	
Personal purpose	To demonstrate competence; to address challenges, have an impact and get things done
Possible Mottos/ Favourite Sayings	“Nothing ventured, nothing gained” “Strike while the iron is hot” “Hurry up, I haven’t got all minute”
Pace & intensity	Fast and forceful, high intensity
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accepts challenges and takes risks - Source of ideas, options and new possibilities - Optimistic and forward looking - Takes the initiative - High energy and endurance - Appears capable and wins - Inspires others to perform to a high level - Expects accountability for results
Excesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tackles non-feasible tasks - Innovates to avoid boredom - Unrealistic about limitations of time and resources - Gets over-extended and over-committed; overworks - Intimidates others - Unwilling to delegate - Manipulates others’ loyalty - Sees end justifying the means
Affiliating-Perfecting	
Personal purpose	To work hard in the service of a noble cause or respected leader; to improve self, others, the world
Possible Mottos/ Favourite Sayings	“If a job’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well” “No pain, no gain” “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link”
Pace & intensity	Urgent, high intensity
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Willing to put in extra effort to produce excellence - Wants to learn from past and to do better next time - Can challenge if principle or process are not right - Cooperative and compliant with respected authority - Empathises, compassionate and understanding of others - Committed and loyal team player - Service minded and selfless
Excesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fault-finding, never satisfied - Ruminates on flaws / failures - Can be stubborn, inflexible, and unable to compromise - Defensive or reactive to negative feedback - Preoccupied by others’ pain - Disabled by doubts about own skills and experience - Over-serious, martyred

Appendix 11

Slight Shift of the Researcher's Role at the End of the Observation Process

Towards the end of the observation process, at the beginning of March 2010, when no significantly new data seemed to be emerging, I had the notion of a slight shift in my role with one of the case study teams, at All Saints. I envisaged moving from being a purely non-contributing participant observer to a participant observer who might make a few occasional process observations and comments during the staff team meeting, and who might also offer some observations and suggestions privately to the vicar, outside the meetings. The purpose of making these small interventions would be to try to clarify or improve the process of the staff team meeting. This slight change in role would only apply to the last three observations of this team's meetings, by which point I was not expecting significant new data to emerge.

Readings in the research methodology suggested that this change would not be problematic, provided it was explicitly negotiated with the vicar and staff team of All Saints.⁴⁶⁴ The idea was discussed with my doctoral supervisor, who was content provided the change was negotiated with the team, and did not affect the research purpose. Given that part of my overall purpose was to develop Bridge Builders' training and intervention approach with church staff teams, the change proposed would give a brief experience of taking one particular approach to intervention, and so fitted well with the research purpose.

I therefore contacted the vicar of All Saints, and arranged to discuss the idea with him over lunch before the staff team meeting on 4 March. He was enthusiastic about the idea, and we started immediately with me offering one basic observation and suggestion, about the use of summarising. Later in the day, after observing the team meeting, I offered some brief feedback, and also a suggestion for a book to read.⁴⁶⁵ We agreed that I would propose the change in role within the team meeting to the rest of the staff at their meeting on 10 March. This was a more extended planning day, from 9.30 a.m. to 2.30 p.m., held in the vicarage. At the meeting on 10 March, once the team moved into discussion of agenda, we started with a discussion about my proposed shift in role. Having explained what I envisaged, there followed a 20-minute discussion, which indicated some anxiety on the part of various team members. I explained that I would be improvising, as the approach being suggested was different from the type of approach to intervention that I would typically take in my working role (where I would be much more directive and interventionist). Eventually I seemed to have satisfied the various questions, and the team all agreed to try out the change in my role, to enable me to make a few process comments and observations during the course of the three remaining meetings that would be observed. I made two or three observations during the course of the remainder of that meeting, and a few further comments in the other two meetings. However, my more significant intervention was probably the private comments and observations made to the vicar outside the team meetings.

⁴⁶⁴ Colin Robson, *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002²) and Carolyn D. Smith and William Kornblum (eds), *In the Field: Readings on the Field Research Experience* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996)

⁴⁶⁵ I recommended: Patrick M. Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2002)

There were three main reasons for proposing this change with the All Saints team. First, there were some basic mistakes which kept recurring in their meetings – most of which are explored in the data documented in Chapter IV of the dissertation – which I thought could potentially be addressed relatively easily. Second, I thought that both the vicar and the staff team of All Saints would be open to receiving some comments and suggestions for improvement in the process of their meetings. Third, I found that by this stage in the research process I was struggling a little to maintain the detached observer role that had needed to be adopted in a disciplined way throughout the research project up to that point.

As part of making this small change, I sought to evaluate the shift and its impact, both by journaling about it in my researcher reflections after each of the last three observations of the All Saints' staff team meetings, and by exploring it briefly within the All Saints' interviews when the opportunity arose.

In my journals I noted that I did not become comfortable with the change of role within the space of the three meetings available to try out the approach. I was conscious of feeling my way and not being confident with a dual mode of operating. I found that it complicated and made more difficult the process of observation and making notes on what was observed, as I was also trying to judge whether and when to contribute to the meeting with a process observation. So I was not as fully attentive to the observation task. In consequence, I had some reservations about the helpfulness of the slight shift in role.

However, there were some encouraging reflections from two of the team members in the interviews, while the third did not comment on the shift in role. The vicar of All Saints made the following comments:

At a certain point you moved your mode from observation to helpful interjection on process-orientated things, which I found very draining in terms of thinking about things on a number of levels. So thinking about the issue at hand, thinking about what's happening in team dynamics here, and then ... I know you weren't assessing, but I felt under assessment, and being frequently called back to think about process; I found that very difficult. But I think I would do it again in a minute, because I think the fruit of that – I know this wasn't necessarily the intention of you doing a research project – but the fruit of it has been that we have, all of us, thought more about process, which is a fruit that's benefited us as a team; so yes, both uncomfortable, but like going to the gym, it's not comfortable, you don't do it for being comfortable, you do it because you want to achieve a result.

I had not foreseen quite how difficult the change in role might be for the vicar. However, it appears that despite the difficulties, he was grateful for what it provided for him and the rest of the team, in terms of a greater awareness of the process of their meetings. In the interview with the administrator at All Saints, he offered the following comments on the shift in role:

That was both helpful and annoying at the same time. It was annoying because it interrupted the conversation and the train of thought, but actually very helpful in terms of illuminating some of the difficulties and the pickles that we were getting ourselves into. So I for one would've loved to have known more about what you thought of us, but we all obviously recognised that that was not part of the deal at that point.

Again, although the administrator found a negative aspect to the change, in terms of some interruptions, he appreciated the observations and comments offered, and would have liked more.

My conclusion therefore was that the change in role was probably worth experimenting with at that point in the observation process, after ten meetings had already been observed, and when little new data might be expected to emerge. This was because the small interventions seemed to offer something beneficial to the vicar and the rest of the team, and to achieve their purpose of clarifying or improving the process of the meeting, and raising awareness of the meeting process. The slight shift did not add significantly to the gathered research data, but neither did it affect the earlier substantive data gathered, which was the primary source of the data analysis. So it was largely neutral in terms of the research project.

Appendix 12

Interview Schedule

DMin Research Project: Case Study of Two Church Staff Teams

Interview number:

Introduction and Informed Consent

1. Go through the informed consent form.

Warm-Up Questions

2. I will begin by asking a few questions for the record. Can you start, please, by telling me your **name** and your **age**?
3.
 - a) What is your **role** at [name of church], and how long have you been in this role?
 - b) Have you been part of the staff team meeting throughout your time in the role?
4. What **was your previous experience** prior to your current role?
5. What have you done by way of **theological education or training**?

Thank you. I am now going to begin the digital voice recording.

The Staff Team Meeting Generally

6. Let's now talk generally about staff team meetings. How **frequently** are staff team meetings meant to happen, and **how long** are they meant to last?
7. What do you understand to be the **purpose** of your staff team meetings?
8. To what extent do your staff team meetings **achieve this purpose**?
9. What are some things that are good about **the way the staff team meetings are handled**, that is about the **process** of the meetings?
10. What, if any, are some things you find **frustrating or unsatisfactory** about the way that staff team meetings are handled, that is about the process of the meetings?
11. What **improvements**, if any, would you like to see to the way staff team meetings are handled, that is to the process of the meetings?
12. What is the **balance** in staff team meetings between **getting the task done** and **building staff relationships**? *Follow on:* How happy are you with the balance?

Disagreement in Staff Team Meetings, and Theological Reflection

13. Let's move to focus on how disagreement and low-level conflict are handled in team meetings. Can you think of **an example** of a disagreement or low-level conflict which was **handled well or creatively** in a team meeting? [*Possible follow on:* What was good about the way the disagreement was handled?]

14. Can you think of **an example** of a disagreement or low-level conflict which was **handled poorly** in a team meeting, or which you thought could have been better handled? [*Possible follow on:* What was poor about the way the disagreement was handled?]
15. What's your **vision** of how staff team meetings could or should deal with any disagreement and low-level conflict? *Follow on:* On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being high, how close is the reality to your vision? *Follow on:* What leads you to give that rating?
16. To what extent are any disagreements or low-level conflicts typically worked out **through negotiation** between team members, and to what extent are they mainly settled by the **Vicar determining the way forward**?
17. What do you think **God might want for you as a staff team**, when it comes to dealing with disagreement and low-level conflict in team meetings?
18. Set out on this sheet [a handout] are three ways you might view dealing with disagreement and low-level conflict in the Christian community. Which one best reflects your own view?

Dealing with disagreement and conflict is:

- a) central and important, a core part of what it means to be a faithful Christian community, or
- b) something that does need to be done as a Christian community, but is not really central, or
- c) something that is a distraction from the important things about being a Christian community.

Follow on: What leads you to this view?

Cool-off Questions

19. Let's move to draw the interview towards a close. I'm thinking back to the process of observing the staff meetings at the end of 2009 and beginning of this year. I'm wondering if there is anything that you found either enjoyable or uncomfortable about the process of having the staff team meetings observed?
20. Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed, and for sharing your thoughts. Is there **anything else** that you would like to say about your staff team meetings, or about how you deal with disagreement as a team, which could be helpful for me to understand?

Appendix 13

Schedule of Interviews

DMin Research Project: Case Study of Two Church Staff Teams

Monday, 19 July 2010

All Saints Church

1. Vicar (clergy, male) 10:11-11:07am (56 mins)
2. Administrator (lay, male) 11:50am-12:39pm (49 mins)
3. Minister in training (clergy in training, female) 2:07-3:14pm (67 mins)

(Sub-total: 172 mins)

Tuesday, 20 July 2010

St Peter's Church

4. Vicar (clergy, male) 9:42-10:26am (45 mins)
5. Associate vicar (clergy, female) 10:54am-12:06pm (72 mins)
6. Senior administrator (lay, female) 12:37-1:08pm (31 mins)

(Sub-total: 148 mins)

TOTAL: 320 minutes of interview

Appendix 14

All Saints Original Staff Meeting Agenda

STAFF MEETING on _____

To support All Saints in the Mission of Jesus

Present:		
<u>Item</u>	<u>Discussion</u>	<u>Action Points</u>
1. Testimony for Encouragement		
2. The Vision and Mission: Glorify, Grow and Go		
3. Items from last meeting - have we done the action points?		
4. Review of the last week		
5. Review of Sunday		
6. Dates / Planning for the week ahead		
7. Advance dates to note		
8. Planning for upcoming events		

<u>Item</u>	<u>Discussion</u>	<u>Action Points</u>
9.		
10.		
11.		
12.		
13. People and Pastoral Issues		
14. Report back from Meetings		
15. Highlight things to communicate to others		
16. How was this meeting? Have we fulfilled the purpose?		

Appendix 16

Outline for a Bridge Builders Course for Staff Teams of Larger Churches
(for groups of at least 4 people from the same team; up to 24 course participants)

“Building the Church Staff Team & Holding Better Team Meetings”

Draft Programme Overview

Day 1 – Tuesday (9:00am-5:30pm)

9:00-11:00 Session 1: Introductory Elements

- Introductions and opening worship
- Introduction to the Gilmore-Fraleigh Style Profile
- Exercise in small groups with people of similar style profile

11:00-11:20 Break

11:20-1:00 Session 2: Theological Framework & Initial Assessment of Team Functioning

- Presentation offering a theological framework for the course
- Exercise in teams affirming the strengths of current staff team functioning, and areas for possible development
- Exercise clarifying the existing pattern of staff team interaction, and the balance between task-focused time, social time and spiritual support (e.g. prayer for one another)

1:00-2:00 Lunch

2:00-3:40 Session 3: Affirming of Team Members’ Strengths

- Demonstration of group affirmation of strengths of individual team member’s style and personal acknowledgement of style excesses
- Work in teams affirming strengths of individual team member’s style and acknowledging style excesses

3:40-4:00 Break

4:00-5:30 Session 4: Exploring the Purposes of the Staff Team Meeting

- Brainstorm in teams on the current purpose of staff team meetings
 - Presentation of Rendle & Beaumont’s proposed purposes of staff team meetings
 - Revisiting purpose of staff team meetings in teams
- Oral feedback on day; closing examen*

Day 2 – Wednesday (9:00am-5:30pm)

9:00-11:00 Session 5: Designing the Staff Team Meeting & Distinguishing Content and Process

- Opening worship
- Brief presentation by each team leader of current staff team meeting structure and standard agenda
- Exploration of how meeting agenda is formed and how meeting is structured
- Clarifying the distinction between content and process

11:00-11:20 Break

11:20-1:00 **Session 6: Facilitating Discussion and the Skill of Summarising**
- Role-play discussion, with trainer illustrating the skill of summarising
- Role-play discussion with team members taking turns at summarising, with feedback from observers

1:00-2:00 *Lunch*

2:00-3:40 **Session 7: Going Beyond Positions to Explore Underlying Concerns**
- Introducing the problem with an illustration
- Role-play discussion of item from one of the staff team's recent agendas, with feedback from observers; repeated with different topic and different facilitator

3:40-4:00 *Break*

4:00-5:30 **Session 8: Revisiting the Theological Framework**
- Brief presentation
- Group Bible study on some of the theological themes identified
Oral feedback on day; closing examen

Day 3 – Thursday (9:00am-4:00pm)

9:00-11:00 **Session 9: Testing for Consensus & Decision Rules**
- Opening worship
- Brief presentation on the problem of silence = consensus, and introduction to some possible ways to test for consensus
- Role-play practice at testing for consensus

11:00-11:20 *Break*

11:20-1:00 **Session 10: Putting It All Together**
- Role-play practice of a team meeting, with feedback from observers
- Review of key lessons to focus on

1:00-1:45 *Lunch*

1:45-2:45 **Session 11: Planning for Return Home**
- Work in teams to identify insights from the course, to agree what planning they will do differently in future, and when they will revisit the Gilmore-Fraleigh style profiles as a team
- Exploring how to share learning with team members who are not present

2:45-3:00 *Break*

3:00-4:00 **Session 12: Conclusion and Review**
- Closing theological reflection
- Opportunity for silent reflection on the course as a whole
- Individual sharing of insights and learning from the course
- Completion of evaluation forms

4:00 *Close*