

# SHAPING PLACE

*Reflections on 4 SDF Projects  
in Durham Diocese*



CRANMER HALL  
DURHAM

Centre for Church Planting  
Theology and Research

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*Reflections on 4 SDF Projects in  
Durham Diocese*

EDITED BY WILL FOULGER



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DURHAM



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Cranmer Hall  
St John's College  
3 South Bailey  
Durham DH1 3RJ

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## FOREWORD



One of the core practices in training people for mission and ministry is cultivating the art of theological reflection: the ability to relate doctrine and ministry, theory and practice, church and academy. Within the church's training institutions, we seek to weave this practice across every

area of what we teach and also to embed it in our 'implicit curriculum', those things that are not formally taught but rather are part of the culture.

It is ironic, then, that at the wider level of the whole church we are often poor at reflecting theologically on our practice. This is especially perilous when the practice in question is new, as with the current church planting movement in the Church of England.

The Centre for Church Planting Theology and Research aims to address this deficit by offering high-quality research into this area, research that is both empirical and theological, and I am delighted to commend this first report from the new Centre. As you read, you will gain a glimpse of the variety of what is going on, and the insufficiency of simplistic 'either-or' categories to account for this. You will see the need for an ongoing conversation, with capacious and evolving vocabulary to describe what is happening. And above all, to pick up on the name of one of the communities described

here, I trust that this report will renew your *hope* in the God who is even now at work, calling people to know him and growing his church.

Revd Dr Nick Moore, Warden Cranmer Hall

## THE CENTRE FOR CHURCH PLANTING THEOLOGY AND RESEARCH

The past 10 years has seen a dramatic increase in the planting of new Church of England churches. Since 2014 some 1,600 new worshipping communities have been planted or grafted across 31 Dioceses and since 2017 over £140 million of Strategic Development Funding has been invested in new missional projects, many of which involve the establishing of new churches. The Church of England's vision and strategy for the 2020's includes the vision to see a mixed ecology church where new communities of faith are the norm, and in 2021 announced plans to establish over 10,000 new worshipping communities over the next decade.

It is right to name what is happening as a *new church planting movement in the Church of England*. When we ask what God is doing in the life of our nation at this time, we believe that church planting is an integral part of the answer.

However, if church planting is to take hold across the whole of the church, it will require a rich theological account of the purpose and potential of new Church of England churches. We must be continually imagining and re-imagining.

We are convinced that good theological practical work is beneficial for both the practice of starting new churches, and for theologians. In the first instance, starting new churches – since the church is God's – is a theological endeavour all the way down. Every decision we make about

churches, from structure and resourcing through to styles of worship and buildings, says something about who we think God is and what He is doing in His world. Second, starting new churches provides the church with a rich opportunity for reflection on missiology, ecclesiology and theology. In this sense, starting new churches should be received as a theologically generative activity. Indeed, as has always been the case with the relationship between missiology and theology, the task of engaging Christian forms (in this instance, church) with new cultures, provides the church with a rich opportunity for theological learning and growth.

We are aware that the conversation about starting new churches in the Church of England, has not been carried out in this spirit of openness to learning and challenge. Rather the conversation has tended to be marked by a polarity, between those who are doing deep ecclesial reflection, and those who are seeking substantive impact. Such a divide is harmful to the church: it risks allowing practitioners to go about their work without the valuable and vital theological reflection that will allow them to start genuinely faithful churches, and it risks theologians being able to carry out their work without recourse to the vital learnings from new churches in their engagement with the world. Specifically, we are aware that this divide has left certain parts of the church - for whom fidelity to ecclesial forms and practices is central - feeling outside of the planting conversation.



In response to this, the research centre exists to provide research that is:

- Driven by mission
- Driven by an empirical theological methodology
- Driven by a theological vision
- Driven by partnerships

There are two foci to our work:

### **1 | Transforming the quality of the conversation about starting new churches.**

Our hope is for a theologically rich, and constructive conversation about starting new churches so that every part of the church might see starting new churches as having integrity as well as making impact.

We do this by establishing a growing network of planter-theologians who are engaged in this conversation. This network is increasingly representative of the sweep of the church's theological traditions and includes members from various spheres of church life: practitioners; teachers; leaders; gatekeepers; academic theologians. We will gather for an annual conference, exploring the theology of church planting.

### **2 | Unique theological empirical research into the activity of church planting.**

We will seek to serve the church by helping discover a) what is going on and, b) what we are learning about God, mission, and the church from existing praxis.

This research has been driven by the conviction that both mission and the church are most basically about God. As such, we cannot speak of the church (or her mission) without recourse to theological categories and concepts. What are being explored here, it is argued, are not simply instances of human communities and groups, but are in a real sense divine events. We cannot but think theologically about what is happening here.

That said, the church is always and inevitably mixed: the work of God through very human means. Therefore, the theological research must really be *research* (what is going on) and not just an academic gloss or imaginary set of principles. 'Church' is a reality that can only exist in the sense of particular churches, and thus our ecclesiology must always be about the real, 'concrete' church. Put differently, we can't theologise from distance, and there is an impetus on us to discover what is happening on the ground. This is why we have carried out this research.



# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research presented here is the result of time spent with four new churches in Durham Diocese, between November 2021 and May/June 2022. The starting of each church was enabled by strategic development funding (SDF) which was awarded in two tranches (Dec 2018 and June 2020) following successful bids.

This piece of research has two foci:

1. What is going on? This is the empirical task. Where did these churches come from? What are they like? Who is attending?
2. What might God be teaching us through these new ventures of faith? This is the theological task. What might we learn about our ecclesiology and missiology from these sites? Where are we seeing faithful practice, and where might we want question?

## 1. What is Going on?

- We engaged with four flourishing, and growing Christian communities in Durham Diocese:
  - St Paul's, Stockton: a church regeneration established through the sending from one church to another of a small team, led by a planting curate.
  - Vine Church, Wynyard: a brand-new church serving a new housing estate and meeting in the newly built church primary school, led by two ordained priests.
  - Oxclose Church, Oxclose: a newly designated resourcing church, established through strategic development funding enabling an ordained lead and a growing team.
  - Hope for All, Pennywell: a social enterprise project connected to an existing inherited church, reimagining mission in a context of church decline, led by a lay-person and with some clergy involvement.
- These four communities each represent new forms of church, however, the ways in which these churches are new differs widely in each context.

- New people are coming to faith within these communities. People who otherwise would not otherwise have been leading and involved in ministry are now doing so.

## 2. What might God be teaching us through these new ventures of faith?

A detailed summary of reflections that emerged out of time spent with each of the four churches can be found in chapter four. Our hope is that these reflections are theologically-practical all the way through. The observations made range from the more concrete-practical, to the more theoretical.

As well as these reflections on starting new churches, we believe the research demonstrates some more generalisable **points regarding a theology of starting new churches:**

1. Church Planting is too specific a term for what is, in fact, a host of approaches to seeking new life within our churches. One of the central findings is therefore *that our language must be broad enough to allow for the diversity approaches we have encountered. We see 'starting new churches' as the best language to use.*
2. Starting new churches is theologically generative, asking important questions, and causing us to reflect on our ecclesiology. *New churches are an opportunity to hone and develop our theology of church.* If the only questions we ask are: 'are these new churches



working?’ we sell ourselves short and miss the opportunity for far richer learning. New churches should therefore be seen as a vital object of enquiry for theologians.

3. *Starting new churches is a vital aspect of our necessarily ongoing missional learning as a whole church.* These new churches are wrestling with what it means to engage with their contemporary context whilst remaining faithful as churches and as such are potential hubs of learning for the whole church.

4. *Those on the ground think and reason as theologians.* New churches are a theological-practical activity, and each church is shaped by a set of theological convictions. We saw the ‘four voices’ of theology (Operant, espoused, normative and formal) at play in each context.

These four general observations, coupled with the more specific issues arising from each context raise important theological questions for how we conceive of church planting in the future. Our hope is that these questions serve to help those who are involved in the task of *starting new churches* to reflect theologically on their own praxis, and to inform those who are engaged in strategic decisions about future church planting.

This piece of work is the result of what has been a team effort. We carried out the empirical research individually - one of us in each context - and brought these

findings back to a regular shared conversation in which we encouraged and challenged one another's assumptions. The team consisted of:

Will Foulger (editor)  
Rachel Frost  
Richard Barber  
Sarah Quinn

Our thanks go to our colleagues at Cranmer Hall, who enabled the research to happen through administrative work, tutorial support, and general encouragement and energy.

Above all though we wish to thank all those at the four churches. It was a deep privilege to spend time with you and to get to ask you about the things you hold most precious. Thank you for your patience and flexibility. We hope this report in some way honours all of your labours.



## 2. A WORD ON METHOD

This section summarises our methodology

## Method

Each of our four-person team spent time with one site over this period, coming back together regularly as a team to share findings and ask questions of one another's work. The time at each site consisted of limited participant observation (attending events, services, and activities) and semi-structured interviews with clergy and congregation members.

The research from each site is presented here in the form of a) a summary of the context b) theological themes that emerged. These theological themes are not in any sense 'neutral' findings, rather, they are reflective of the sorts of theological questions we have been asking as a team. In this we have been faithful to an approach we describe as 'empirical theology'.

We were aware that all empirical research must constantly try to balance the perceptions of the observer with the reality being observed, and this is an ongoing endeavour rather than a problem with a definite solution. We have, however, been open about the fact that this was from the start a theological piece of research: that we were interested in what these sites were telling us about ecclesiological, missiological and theological issues and of the relationship between those three. With these qualifications in mind, it is important to note that:

1. We believe that these pieces of work have integrity in terms of the sites they are seeking to describe and comprehend. That is, we have not made-up details, or

twisted the facts on the ground. The research is presented here with the agreement of the leaders in each context, who were asked to read drafts of this reflection and comment on the accuracy of the presentation.

2. As pieces of empirical-theology these are necessarily limited in their descriptive scope. We have not been able to explore every facet of life within each of these contexts. All four are – as with any community – complex and multi-faceted. What follows are not however pieces of ethnography in the purest sense, and we have deliberately not sought to present every complex relationship, power struggle, area of conflict, character brilliance or limitation at play within each place.

3. We hope the pivot from the site to the theological reflection is not clunky, but makes sense of the context. These would be poor pieces of research if the move from observation to reflection were a second step; with the theology simply 'imposed' from the outside or tagged on as an extra. We believe that these theological themes are at play within each of the contexts whether the specific language is used or not. In this sense, we have tried to pick up on the ecclesiology/missiology/theology that is employed or being used by those within the context to make sense of what they are doing.





### 3. SUMMARY OF REFLECTIONS

This section provides an overview of the reflections which are described in detail in Chapter 4.

## St Paul's

### *Language Matters*

Language matters within a community. St Paul's have shifted from language of 'church revitalisation' to 'church resurrection.' This is theologically rich language, resonating with the themes of the Gospel.

### *Reflecting on Grief*

Three levels of grief can be seen at St Paul's: the grief experienced by: (i) the 'receiving' congregation, whose church is changing; (iii) the grief of the sent team, who are learning to come to terms with the gap between expectation/previous experience, and the reality of the new site; and (ii) the grief of the leader, especially as roles change from curacy (second-chair) to becoming an incumbent (first-chair), and both contexts (sending/receiving) adapt to these changes

### *Theological Imaginaries*

St Paul's story is determined by metaphors, motifs, and images, which work to establish what we call a *theological imaginary*. Such theological imaginaries shape a church's life and we should pay close attention to them as a new church begins.

## Vine Church

### *Challenging the Binaries*

Vine Church Wynyard is a Bishop's Mission Order (BMO), yet it was established and exists along parochial principles. It serves a definable area, and there is a definitive parochial shape to the ministry of its leaders. Vine Church models how planting need not be in opposition to but can serve the parish ideal.

### *Church, Secularisation, and Institutions*

Vine Church was established as a project between the existing parish, wider diocese, and the newly built church school. It offers a model for planting; making the most of the church's existing resources of schools and their communities. Schools are one of the few stable local institutions to which people still belong.

### *Worship and Accessibility*

Vine Church has established its services to be accessible. As the church grows, and the need for discipleship increases, there are important questions to ask about whether Sunday services can or should be the primary place of accessibility and growth. Vine church also raises questions about authorised forms of worship within the Church of England, as it seeks to establish new churches.

## Oxclose Church

### *Resource Church*

Oxclose is an experiment as a resourcing church. It was designated a resource church and given funding prior to the church having many existing resources or ability to support other churches. The church presents us with good questions about the challenges of seeking to stimulate growth through resourcing.

### *Planting into Limits*

Oxclose is seeking to be a planting church. There are very real challenges emerging about planting into, and from, contexts of perceived deprivation.

### *Church and Place*

Oxclose church is a parish church, and it is a good example of a church that it is of and for a defined place. The church is seeking to plant into other defined places, and yet is also aiming to be, in some sense, a networked church. There are questions here about the relationship of place and network.

## Hope For All

### *Raising New Leaders*

Hope For All have had success in raising new leaders. Questions remain about how we are intentional about raising lay leaders and the extent to which this is possible within the threefold order of ministry.

### *Social Media*

Hope For All have made good use of social media, but have done so with some particular ethical commitments. There are good questions to be asked of how we use social media in a theological faithful manner.

### *Ecclesiology*

Hope For All tests the language of church planting. It is questionable whether Hope For All is a church, and thus whether this is helpful language to be using in this instance. The term 'planting' is resisted by the leadership of Hope For All, which gives some indication of how loaded this term is and especially for those within an Anglo Catholic tradition.





## 4. REFLECTIONS ON FOUR CHURCHES



# ST PAUL'S CHURCH, STOCKTON

## St Paul's Church, Stockton

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St Paul's has been meeting as a congregation in Stockton since before 1925. In 1925, after some parish boundary changes, the congregation moved into a church building, which was built in the middle of a local authority housing estate. Over a long stretch of time, the current church building was built and in 1966 was finally completed. Throughout this stretch of time from 1940s-1980s, the congregation at St Paul's grew to a high of over 300 people and had significant engagement with the local community. Interviewees however spoke of how quickly the numbers declined from 1985, and in the early 2000s St Paul's had a congregation of around 25 people.

In 2004, the local Methodist church, which was struggling to keep its building open, joined St Paul's as a Local Ecumenical Partnership (LEP). One person, who was originally part of the Methodist congregation, said how welcoming the St Paul's congregation was; a theme which is picked up below. Despite the fruit which was borne from the partnership, the church experienced a long period of vacancy, and numbers eventually began to dwindle again. By 2016, the St Paul's community had to consider closure due to the lack of long-term sustainability. In 2018, there was a move away from the formal LEP arrangement, and St Paul's — in preparation for what was next — returned to being a solely Church of England church, but retained Methodists within its community.

As St Paul's faced unwanted closure, they approached the Area Dean at that time to explore other options beyond closure. At the same time, All Saints Church, Eaglescliffe was looking to plant a church and the current Vicar of St Paul's, Rev'd Paul Arnold, was looking for a curacy title post. He was encouraged to consider a curacy at All Saints, with the intention of leading a revitalisation of St Paul's.

In 2018, the Bishop of Durham and St Paul's invited a team from All Saints, which was to be led by Rev'd Paul Arnold, to work with the congregation at St Paul's to breathe fresh life into the community. In May 2021, St Paul's relaunched as a church community with a vision to be 'The Beating Heart of God's love for Stockton'. Just before its relaunch, the congregation had shrunk to around 10 (during the pandemic). A team of 15 was brought in with the relaunch and the church has since grown to have an average Sunday congregation of between 41 and 56, with a wider worshipping community of 70, reaching into 4 primary schools and with regular Alpha courses being run.

The church has a vision to engage younger people, while also aiming to create a community of all generations in a shared space. Practical steps towards inhabiting this vision consist of setting up a toddler group, continuing to provide a youth drop in, having a monthly coffee morning, and throughout the summer they have been using the Alpha course as a foundation of their Sunday services. The church have also held a holiday club and are growing links with the local schools. The church team have taken steps to explore how to creatively welcome people into the building and improve accessibility in worship.

## Two Processes: Culture Change & Refurbishment

Revitalisation for St Paul's has involved some specific processes, which came through in our interviews. First, the revitalisation has involved a process of culture change which has looked like both a listening and re-listening to the context. This process of re-listening proved particularly important for the church revitalisation because of the presence of an existing congregation and the need to hear the story of their context, alongside discerning where God may be calling them to go next. One person spoke of how this process of listening had fed into the culture change. For the first six months the leadership team made a concerted effort to bring everyone together as one congregation. On Pentecost Sunday in May 2021, when St Paul's relaunched, the churches held a commissioning service at All Saints before walking to a local park to meet with the existing congregation at St Paul's for a picnic. Everyone then processed to St Paul's behind a large cross as a symbolic act; a visual representation of the intention that everyone might move together into this next stage of St Paul's life.

A second process which St Paul's experienced in its revitalisation is the refurbishment of the building. The building was renovated by adding in windows, new flooring, heating, and double glazing; all of which brought more light into the building. One congregation member said that even though they knew the 'church' to be the people and not the building, they felt that having a suitable and flexible space

was important for their overall mission and outreach in the community.

From the interviews it was clear that central to the revitalisation at St Paul's has been a shared understanding of God's faithfulness, and a commitment to welcome. Those we spoke with commented on the fact that St Paul's journey of growth, decline and revitalisation has not been easy. Yet each told of how they have seen God's faithfulness, particularly in the provision of resources and in enabling the congregation to persevere in seeking the direction God wanted to take St Paul's in.

The theme of welcome was also prominent; one person who had been a member of the Methodist congregation, spoke of how welcome was something they prioritised as a congregation. Congregants spoke of how they wanted people to feel welcome at St Paul's and for that to be a hallmark of their culture as a church. In this sense, the commitment to welcome has helped to bridge the stories of St Paul's (what was and what is to come) in the sense of being a shared value; something that was important and which is now making possible a new chapter.

## Theological Themes

### A. Language Matters

A significant theme which has arisen through the research has been the discussion surrounding the language of revitalisation. Through the interviews, it was clear that the congregation affirmed the meaning of the term 'revitalisation'. They described it to be a process that a church

experiences in which, a church that would otherwise close, receives a new lease of life from God. They spoke of this being facilitated by a team of people from other surrounding churches coming in to work with the church which is dying. Whilst affirming the concept, however, we also heard how there has been a move away from the use of terms such as 'revitalisation', 'root and graft', and a move towards the language of 'church resurrection'.

One person explained how the language of resurrection stems from the Easter narrative. In this sense, the perceived failure of the cross is held as parallel to churches near to closure, such as St Paul's. The individual spoke then of how we know through the Easter narrative that Christ's death on the cross is not the end, but makes a way to the newly resurrected life. For churches, like St Paul's, who experience 'church resurrection', it is as if they too experience the nature of dying and the acceptance which needs to come in that process, in order that through the work of God they may experience resurrection and fresh life. The language also enables a way of speaking of continuity with what had been: the risen Christ carried the scars of the crucifixion on His resurrected body, and so too the church that emerges from the new impetus and resource, will not be an entirely new 'thing' but will carry the marks of what was.

This exploration surrounding the language of revitalisation and the introducing of 'church resurrection' could hold wider implications for church planting. It certainly raises questions about the language we use, and what we advertently or inadvertently imply when we use terms such as 'revitalisation.' The language of 'church resurrection'

encapsulates something of what we as Christians are to proclaim and is thus congruent with our message, and the unique claims of the Gospel. It is the church's language. Further, because it is both Good Friday and Easter-centric language, the term encapsulates how in this process there is an element of descent, of dying to self, as well as the ascent which comes through the resurrection. The language thus reminds us that the work is – like resurrection – miraculous in the sense of being utterly dependant upon the action of God, who alone can bring life from death. As Easter language, then, this term opens a space for us to recognise and talk honestly about what the 'death' of church might look (and feel) like. This brings us on to the second theological theme.

## **B. Reflecting on Grief**

A second theme which has arisen from the research is the nature of grief which St Paul's has, and continues to travel through, in its process of revitalisation/resurrection. Three aspects of grief came through in the research.

The first aspect is the grief of the existing congregation. One person framed this aspect of grief as being about the process of the existing congregation coming to terms with the fact that the church they have known and loved is heading towards closure, and that things need to look different. They spoke of how it is important to enable the congregation to experience a range of emotions which accompany grief, such as denial, rather than expecting them to jump to a place of acceptance immediately.

The second aspect of grief is the grief of the graft team; those who came from All Saints to St Paul's. It was clear that there was intentional work to be done within the team to help them to come to terms with the loss of what they had at All Saints as they moved to St Paul's. This aspect of grief has involved a reorientation of perceptions. Many of the team had expected that St Paul's would at some point look like All Saints. The task here was one of helping team to recognise their lenses, and becoming open to a reorientation of expectations about what a revitalised St Paul's could be in light of the particular resources and context in front of them.

The third aspect of grief is the grief which the Priest or leader experiences. This aspect of grief involves the deacon or priest putting to one side the things they enjoyed doing as a trainee. There is a unique pattern to this in the Church of England (planting curate becomes incumbent), however this will be shared in other denominations whenever someone moves from being assistant or 'second-chair' to now – through the process of planting or grafting – becoming a leader or 'first-chair'. Like the planting team, the priest must learn to embrace the unique vision of mission and ministry that must emerge out of the new context, all the while dealing with a new role and set of responsibilities.

We would suggest these three aspects of grief could hold wider implications for church planting. They share much with William Bridges' stages of transition which explore the process of letting go, the season between change being announced and change being implemented, and the process

of new beginnings.<sup>1</sup> Although Bridges explores how these stages are not linear, and often happen simultaneously, it is important for individuals and communities to pass through each stage as part of their growth process. Bridges' work — when seen through the lens of church resurrection at St Paul's — suggests the importance of enabling church communities to have the space to grieve in order that they might be able to embrace more fully a new way of being and doing church. This is not simple work, and requires investment of time and care. At very least, it is important that we recognise planting not simply as an exercise in increasing numbers in congregations, but also that we learn to respect the cost and challenge for individuals, families, teams and communities as they engage in planting or grafting work. As well as the obvious missional impulse in planting work, the importance of pastoral work must be noted too. Thus, when framed in terms of the long-term sustainability of the plant, the two things — mission and pastoring — are always bound together.

### C. Theological Imaginaries

A third theme which arose from the research at St Paul's is the importance of theological imagination. Two distinct theological motifs emerged through the interviews time spent at St Paul's, and these were spoken of repeatedly. These theological motifs — which we have deemed to be St Paul's 'theological imaginary' — underpin both the current and foreseeable mission and ministry of St Paul's.

<sup>1</sup> See Bridges, W. and Bridges, S., 2019. *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes*. Hachette UK.

The first theological motif is the imagery of older and younger generations integrating together from Zechariah 8:4. The interviewees expressed how they are wanting to engage with children and young people over the coming year and this first theological motif underpins this vision. They explored how their vision is to be a church which is welcoming and growing younger. As a church, they want to be supporting and nurturing children and young people in their discipleship journey; to create platforms of connection which enable young and old to connect with one another.

The second motif which arose from the interviews was the imagery of God being like a patient gardener in the community at St Paul's. One person spoke of how they have sensed God pruning St Paul's, cutting off what isn't to be carried on from the past, before it was revitalised and shaping what is to be carried on whilst making space for the new to come in. Another used the image of God as a patient gardener as a way of describing revitalisation compared to other models of church planting. In revitalisation, they said, the roots need to be strengthened and go deeper than what they were rather than only planting fresh new roots in. They spoke of how much patience is needed in this strengthening and deepening.

Such theological imaginaries — be they pictures, images, metaphors or parables — are a crucial part of a church plant's foundation. They are not only generative for worship and prayer, but also provide strategic direction. The theological imaginary enables a church to remain both grounded in the Gospel and connected to the reason, the 'why', of its mission and ministry. At St Paul's, the interviewees explored how

their vision flows into their mission which is consequently enabling them to be intentional about the areas of mission and ministry they are engaging with. It is through their imagery of God being a patient gardener, for example, that they can seek to discern what needs to be pruned and what needs to be allowed to grow and bloom.

Theological imaginaries matter, and we should pay attention to them when we consider church planting. Because they are so fundamental to a church's narrative of itself, as well in its relation to the world around it, there could be an issue if, for example, a Diocese's theological imaginary for a church was significantly different from the church's own imaginary. Simply put, it will be the theological imaginary that will likely drive the way forward for the church, rather than any suggestions or directives from 'outside'. Finally, theological imaginaries are a central way in which theology and praxis come together. Theological imaginaries are a device through which we make sense of our context and vocation in light of the Gospel and the tradition — how we envision who God is, what He has done, and what He will do. As such, they serve a plant by providing a controlling narrative which can be owned, shared, and in turn shape its life. To study church plants theologically is in large part to seek to understand these basic theological imaginaries which drive the church's activity.



# VINE CHURCH, WYNYARD



## Vine Church, Wynyard

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Vine Church Wynyard was officially launched on September 26<sup>th</sup> 2021 by Revd Emily Hudghton and Revd Mark Hudghton. Wynyard is an affluent housing development on the border between County Durham and Hartlepool. It is a new development that is growing rapidly. Wynyard had been identified by the deanery several years before as somewhere that would benefit from a new church plant. There are parish churches surrounding Wynyard but they were unable to engage the new development in a meaningful way as they were already at capacity. The idea for Vine Church came about because local churches in Wynyard's deanery approached the diocese of Durham and suggest that Wynyard would be a prime location for a new church plant.

Mark and Emily were appointed to plant what would come to be called Vine Church in August 2020, in the middle of Covid lockdowns. They came to Wynyard without a team. Because of Covid restrictions a service could not be launched straight away, and thus the church began as Mark and Emily prayer walked around the estate. In addition, they set about establishing a regular and high-quality online presence. This involved posting content on social media and being very active in local Facebook groups. This online engagement generated interaction and conversations with people in the community who could then be met with for socially-distanced walks and coffee shop visits as restrictions allowed. At the same time, Mark and Emily established strong relationships with the newly built church school and this led to them

taking regular assemblies over Zoom. Through the use of drama and green screens, they became very well-known by the children on the estate who would stop to chat with them as they saw them around the area. During this time, Emily and Mark also ran an online Alpha course, and saw people make faith commitments through this. Mark and Emily's activity in a time of restrictions arguably laid stronger foundations for the resulting church plant than might have been possible in normal circumstances.

In the summer of 2021, restrictions began to ease and Mark and Emily began 'Sunday Soul', a socially-distanced gathering that took place in their garden at 3pm on a Sunday afternoon. Mark and Emily had identified that Sunday morning is a key family time for many and lots of people who live in Wynyard enjoy going away over the weekend. This gathering was made up of local people who had connected with the church in the preceding year – some of whom had been on Alpha online - and this group would form the core team who would be involved with the organisation and execution of the launch service. This group was made up of almost exclusively new or not-yet Christians. The gatherings consisted of group Bible studies, prayer and discussions of practicalities about the launch. The Bible study was not led from the top-down by Mark or Emily, but was discussion based in which all members of the group were encouraged to share and contribute from their personal response to scripture. The prayer times were open times of prayer in which people were encouraged to pray out loud if they wanted to. Prayer aides were provided for those who wanted to pray out loud but were not quite sure how to. This

interactive and participatory style was a deliberate choice by Mark and Emily and was done in a bid to communicate what is a core conviction of theirs that everybody in church has something to contribute.

The church was launched formally on September 26<sup>th</sup> 2021 by the Bishop of Durham. Approximately 240 people attended the service in the hall of Wynyard Church of England primary school — where the church now meets — before enjoying food and games in the grounds of the school. Most of the 240 people in attendance lived on the Wynyard estate. It was a joyful and upbeat occasion that seemed to communicate a sense of celebration and a desire for community in Wynyard. There have been a small number of other occasions such as Christmas and Easter where attendance was over 100 but regular attendance on a Sunday tends to be somewhere between 30 and 40. If everyone who attends with a reasonable level of regularity were to attend at the same time Sunday attendance would be around 60.

Services continue to happen at 3pm on a Sunday afternoon. One important feature of these services, from the launch onwards, is the fact that they are intergenerational. There are no children's groups, rather everyone is in the same space and there are activities for all ages, as well as clear expectations that a service may be noisy as a result of the children that attend. This was a non-negotiable for Mark and Emily who spoke of their vision to see gatherings as an expression of the diversity within the Kingdom of God. Further, Mark and Emily wanted to ensure that faith was rooted in family life; something they felt was lacking in many church expressions. They reported that many people coming

to Vine church told them they felt they couldn't come to church as a family because other local churches are not set up to accommodate children.

Vine Church is made up predominantly of those new to faith or returning to faith. This continues to be a blessing, as well as presenting real challenges. Emily and Mark have had to think hard about how they deal with the issues that arise in a context where church is forming amongst those who may have little or no knowledge of Christian teaching. Discipling people in this context is a live issue for them: how does one address differing moral perspectives, or encourage regular, sacrificial giving and involvement in a context where occasional charity is the norm, and where perceived loyal commitment to a body or institution looks like very infrequent attendance?

Since the launch service, Vine Church has taken on two new staff members: A children and families pastor; and a (volunteer) communications and operations lead. The former was hired from outside of the congregation, but the latter was appointed from within the church family. As well as these appointments, the church's first small groups have begun meeting and are being led by congregation members. The long-term vision of Vine Church is to grow to such an extent that it is able to plant another church in the local area five years after the launch at the latest.

As of October 2023, the community now contains around 75 people, with typical Sunday attendance of 35-45 (as not everyone's 'regular' attendance is weekly). On Sundays, most of the adults are in their 30s/40s, and between a third and a half of Sunday gatherings are children and young people

under 18. 23 adults are part of Vine Groups, growing in discipleship, reading the Bible and praying with others. This grew from two groups in the 2021-22 academic year to three groups in 2023. There are also 8 young people in the youth group.

### Theological Themes

There are a number of important themes that emerge from our time spent at Vine Church.

#### A. Challenging the Binary

Vine Church challenges the binary that is frequently assumed between the Parish system and church planting. It could be argued that the original planting of Vine Church is justifiable on parish principles. If the Church of England is to be a Christian presence in every community, then the planting of Vine Church enabled the Church to do this more fully by being more present in the community of Wynyard than it was before. That is, although arising from within existing parish boundaries, the estate of Wynyard lacked a church it could call its own. This is further corroborated by the fact that the surrounding churches came together to ask for a church to be planted. This is not a story of a new church plant coming imposing its will on a place that does not want it or need it (the picture so often presented in the planting discourse). Rather this is a story of local parish churches realising that the opportunities and needs surrounding them are greater than they were able to meet on their own. In some respects, Vine Church is now a newly planted parish

church. Mark and Emily would caveat this by reporting how significant it has been to meet in a school, rather than a church building; that this has meant many people have felt more comfortable attending than they may have otherwise, potentially put off by a church building.

There are also points of connection between parish and plant in the way that Mark and Emily have gone about establishing Vine Church. Indeed, the parish principles of place, locality and presence shape the church's existence. When Mark and Emily moved into Wynyard they would regularly walk around the estate wearing their dog collars, meeting people and establishing relationships. They felt that there was reception for this type of ministry. There have also been the beginnings of occasional offices as infant baptisms have begun to become more regular in the church. Regular church members and one-off visitors to the church frequently comment that the planting of Vine Church has given Wynyard a much-needed opportunity to establish and maintain community in a part of the world where, as is commonly acknowledged, such community is hard to find. In this sense, Vine Church has considerable social capital, and has been received very much as a 'good' within the community.

This similarity between the new church plant and inherited parish church is important. In the first place, the population of England continues to grow and, with it, new housing is being built. Wynyard is not the only place that could justify the planting of a new church on parish principles. The question to be asked is: where are the places which currently lack a Christian presence? If the Church of England wishes to be present in every community then the

example of Vine church is significant. The vocation to be present would benefit from retiring the polarities between parish and planting and embracing planting new churches in new places on parish principles.

Second, it is important to note that part of Vine church's success has been due to its ability to play the role commonly reserved for the parish church and her clergy; namely as a public good within and for existing places (the estate), and institutions (the school). It may well be that this role is less vital than it once was in our society – a question that is beyond the scope of this research – however in Wynyard Emily and Mark have very much lived into it, and this has yielded fruit, helping to establish a viable and thriving Christian community.

There is one final binary to do with parish which Vine church helps to deconstruct. The parish is sometimes held as a contrast to other 'congregational' churches. In this way, it is argued that whereas in the latter, ministry is focused on those who attend or who are members, the parish church has a ministry to all. In an inherited parish structure, this distinction is almost tenable. However, when you are planting a new parish church the idea of a separation between 'parish ministry' and 'growing a congregation' quickly evaporates. Inherited parishes have a building, a history, and a congregation (no matter how small) and thus we can just about defend the idea that the church's parochial mission and ministry consist of more than simply the parish priest. But not in a planting situation. In Emily and Mark's case, it really was just the parish priest(s), and if they had attempted to be parish priests to the community of Wynyard – that is, without

the intentional work of establishing, sustaining and growing a congregation, the deficiencies would have been very stark indeed. In this sense, planting new parish churches reminds us that there really is and should be no divide between parish ministry and the task of developing a congregation, building the local church institution and serving society, growing church, and faithful parochial ministry.

## **B. Church, Secularisation, and Institutions**

Vine church was an exceptional case in Durham Diocese in that it was a new church planted within a new school. The experience has so far been a positive one, and there are clear learnings here for the Church of England, about how it makes the most of its schools as assets. The future of Vine Church is unknown in terms of its building space – it may well be that further down the line the church will invest in its own church building and thus give a focal point for mission and ministry within the new estate. For now though, the school has provided a home for the church and, since an agreement was made between Diocese, school, and church, this is a sustainable situation. In terms of resources, the setup seems sensible: the new school was built, and the hall can thus be used by the church for worship.

Thus, although the particular context is somewhat unique (new estate, new school, new church) there are possible learnings for us beyond Wynyard, and not least for existing church schools and parishes. Anecdotally, we are seeing an increase in the number of plants started in church schools, and a growing awareness of the need for better joined up thinking between education, and mission and ministry, teams

within a Diocese. This has been one of the central learnings from the Growing Faith program.<sup>2</sup> All of this is surely a positive development. And, not only because this approach makes sense in terms of resources (new plants need an immediate and stable meeting place, for instance), but also because it captures the sense of our schools as given communities to which we the church is still very much present. Many people within Vine Church spoke about the way in which the school and the church were connected for them. Mark and Emily have thus found the school to be an essential community within Wynyard in large part because it is one of the *only* communities. That is, although Wynyard is a community in the sense of a shared space, genuine community has happened only through the establishing of institutions such as the school. In this sense, it makes perfect sense to be a church here first, since this is a gathered community with a shared purpose and reason; no matter how limited these might be.

One of the marks of our secular age is the phenomena of post-institutionalism. This makes being a local church quite difficult; people do not so readily identify with institutions and, even when they do, their commitment is thin. Yet our schools are frequently one of the few institutions left in many communities. How we engage with our schools, and especially our church schools, is a fascinating theological question. It might be said that in the past, church schools made sense as something that the church should be doing because of their educational contribution. This justification of

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://durhamdiocese.org/mission-discipleship-and-ministry-/children-young-people-and-families/growing-faith/>

course continues to apply: church schools are a ‘good’ in the sense that they serve the common good of local communities and thus the nation. However, Vine Church also suggests a slightly different emphasis to this general picture. Schools now — as institutions that ‘host’ a church — might also be sites of new missional churches. A shared place in which the lines between the ‘secular’ community, and the worshipping community are intentionally blurred — as was always the case in the parish system. This will take some working out, and the church must of course be careful of its duties as an education provider, avoiding using its schools solely as vehicles for growing churches.

### C. Worship and Accessibility.

Emily and Mark have made some decisions about the style of worship at Vine Church. Every service is all-age, and is interactive. The congregation sit around tables, on which are craft activities. The service is divided in ‘blocks’ of 5-8 mins each. There is very limited use of formal liturgy, and a celebration of the eucharist happens monthly. Mark and Emily place a high value on participation and interaction, and they see services as a good opportunity to develop other leaders; they will regularly ask a newer member of the community to share a thought or word in the service. The style of service that Vine Church has adopted has been very popular with the congregation. People we spoke to appreciate the opportunity to discuss, ask questions and arrive at their own conclusions. When asked about the services most of the congregants tend to contrast their experience at Vine church with other church experiences, which they describe as – for

example –‘boring’; ‘inaccessible’; ‘dull’ and ‘unwelcoming’. We heard often that Vine Church is, ‘how we think church should look.’

There are some good theological questions that emerge from all this. In the first instance, it is interesting to note the way in which Emily and Mark see Sunday worship first and foremost as an accessible space. The service itself is shaped by what they perceive to be the culture and norms of the people they seek to reach and serve. Thus, what has shaped the church has been the experience of growth amongst those who have no church background and for whom worship is fundamentally new or strange. Mark and Emily speak of how surprised they’ve been by how far most people are from any understanding of the Bible or the themes of Christian faith. In this sense, they have seen no alternative option but to make Sundays an interactive and participatory space in which people are free to ask questions and learn. Further, since they report that people tend to attend only a few times each month, it is critical that these times are used well to teach and guide people. Others will have taken a different approach. It could be argued that gathered worship does not need to be the primary accessible space, and that when it comes to our worship ‘participation and accessibility’ are values which, although important, might be second to others (for example, holiness, sacramentality, awe etc.) In other words: what are Sunday services for? Emily and Mark argue that discipleship is for them the key to unlocking all this.

Thus, the challenge of helping people to grow in faith within this context. Emily and Mark take discipleship very

seriously and so this is on their radar. They have prioritised teaching and training because for them, ‘as people grow in their relationship with God, so too their worship and sense of awe will come.’ They are aware that Sundays as they are will not be sufficient for those who want to grow in depth. There is limited catechesis possible in a Sunday all-age service, and so they are working hard to establish other space where this can happen. It might just be therefore that in this process the pressure is taken off in terms of making the content so accessible on a Sunday. If learning and teaching can happen elsewhere then the Sunday service might shift emphasis to become predominantly a site of worship and experience.

Whatever one’s ecclesial instincts in all this, Vine Church provides a fascinating case study of the challenges of starting a worshipping community with those who are entirely new to faith.

The other obvious questions that flow from this concern the forms of worship within the body that is the Church of England. As the Church of England starts new churches it will need to continually review its expectations of service forms; especially those as led by its ordained clergy. Is there an expectation of some commonality across new and inherited, so that every church, say, is understood to use liturgy and offer eucharist using authorised forms (Vine Church do incorporate the additional eucharist prayers into their eucharistic services)? The relationship between canon law, and the reality of church practices — especially in new contexts such as this — is an issue worthy of consideration.



# OXCLOSE CHURCH, OXCLOSE

## Oxclose Church, Oxclose

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Oxclose is a part of the 'new town' that is Washington in County Durham, and close to Sunderland and Gateshead. Washington has been an area of industry, and since the local collieries closed, the largest employer in the area is the nearby Nissan factory. Oxclose has a population of around 12,000, and is ranked in the bottom 25% of parishes in terms of deprivation indices.

The church has pioneering origins. As the new village of Oxclose was being built, a local minister decided to begin gathering people in homes. The town planners always imagined a church building being central to the village and in 1972, with agreement from the existing parish church the fledgling household church became its own LEP parish and moved into their new church building. There were two ministry houses built alongside the church: one Anglican, one United Reformed Church.

Throughout the 1970's, the church grew quickly, and by the 1980s had outgrown the original building, moving into the nearby secondary school. These were seen as the 'good days.' Over time this growth plateaued, and the congregation began to decline, moving back to the original building in the 1990s. From this time on the church went through a succession of leaders, with some moments of optimism, before ongoing congregational decline.

The original Diocesan plan, which was connected to the SDF bid, involved Oxclose becoming a graft of another local resourcing church. However for a number of reasons it was

eventually decided to name Oxclose itself as the resource church, giving resources directly to them. As part of this the church ceased to be an LEP and became a Church of England church. The resource given to Oxclose has paid for a full-time stipendiary ordained minister, a youth worker ('emerging generations'), admin support, and a leader for their digital engagement.

The community at Oxclose are intentional about connecting with the local community: they prioritise evangelism; they have ownership of a youth bus which they offer as a resource to other churches; they have invested in their online communities which gathered during the pandemic; they are running Alpha courses. They are also currently laying the groundwork for some new expressions of church: one some miles away in a coastal community where some of their online congregants live, and one a more traditional church plant into a nearby former working men's club.

When we visited on a Sunday, not long after they had begun meeting again in person following the pandemic, there were 17 adults in attendance with roughly the same number of children and young people. Oxclose has a legacy of being a charismatic church, with the first leaders and congregation members variously connected to other charismatic churches and movements.



## Theological Themes

From the conversations with those at Oxclose, three themes emerged that are worthy of further reflection.

### A. Resource Church

First is the role that the designator, 'Resourcing Church' or 'Resource Church' plays at Oxclose church. Oxclose is an anomaly in the resourcing church type, since the norm has been to invest as a way of harnessing and developing what is already flourishing in the context. Resource churches have tended to be larger churches with substantial existing people, time, skills and finance resource. In the case of designating a church a resourcing church (as opposed to starting a new one) the measure has been the extent to which the church is already in some way resourcing (through supporting, training, financial giving) other churches. Oxclose, in contrast, was a small community at the point it received the designator and the financial support. The team and ministry activity now in place is all a fruit of the investment. The question to ask is whether it is possible to grow a resource church in this way. Indeed, as the priest in charge, Revd Gavin Rushton, pointed out, in terms of assets it is not simply that the project has started from a standing start; in one sense, the church was several steps back. The building for example requires work, and is small; not able to host all of the activities and ministries that the team envisage.

Gavin is positive about the investment and what it has meant for the church. It was encouraging for example to hear that he doesn't personally feel the pressure of the targets that

have been given to the church, and which he returns to in quarterly reports. However he is aware of the train coming down the track: the church employs a significant team now, but the funding for these roles is time limited. There is thus an awareness of the need to move towards financial self-reliance within an unusually short space of time.

Size of course is a problematic measure when it comes to church. However, it is worth asking those sorts of questions in this instance: should we expect a small church to grow into a big church through financial investment? Gavin, for example, is committed to growing the church through evangelism and has worked hard to avoid what he calls 'sheep-stealing' (Oxclose has done well in this regard). But what role does financial investment and employment of team have in this task of evangelisation? Do we imagine that financial resourcing can lead to growth? People have come to faith at Oxclose, and others have rediscovered faith (we had the privilege of meeting some these people and hearing their stories). But, as with many churches in our cultural context, such transformation moves only as fast as people's lives. God is evidently at work at Oxclose, but the change is not rapid, and the stories are first-fruits rather than a harvest. So what role does resourcing play in evangelism? Again, the choice is not 'strategic investment or not', rather it is to observe that as a small church which, to all intents and purposes, was in decline, Oxclose church is a particularly acute experiment in resourcing for growth. There are pragmatic questions to consider here, but ultimately, they are theological and ecclesiological ones. What do we think we might be doing

when we invest significant resource into a struggling church community with the aim of growing the church?

Specifically, Oxclose church demonstrates something of the principle that strategic investment must be wedded to the site in an integrative way, built on relationship. The SDF project at Oxclose almost faltered at the first hurdle because the wrong people were appointed for key leadership roles prior to the arrival of Gavin as incumbent. In other words, the resources were given without ownership on the ground, or local congregational buy-in. But a church's ministry is only as strong as the relationships within the congregation. In this sense, a minister is not a neutral 'resource' that can be deployed ('we now have two youth-workers worth of youth-work going on, and one person's worth of admin'). Rather, ministers are people, and what matters is the quality of the interpersonal relationship within the team. Resource thus cannot be imposed from outside but must be integrated, and it would seem that the best person to do this is the individual who has been entrusted (in the Church of England's language) with the 'cure of souls' for that place. Gavin now has a team which is right for Oxclose and this has happened from the bottom-up rather than from the top-down.

## B. Planting into Limits

Second, and relatedly, there is a reason to explore the nature of planting out of a church with limited congregational resources, and into a situation of significant material deprivation. The church has a vision to plant a new worshipping community in a nearby area. As Gavin pointed out, the envisioned plant is a mixed-bag in terms of resources

and opportunities. On the one hand, the plant became possible because of a significant investment of resource — a congregation member who had recently found faith and who purchased a local working men's club. However, the limit lies with the relative strength of the sending congregation. Gavin is aware of the cost of sending a team to a new place — especially a 'more complex place' — and the detrimental impact this might have on the existing congregation. As he put it, Oxclose church sometimes seems, 'too small, and too fragile.' And yet the gift of the building feels like something to be embraced. There is some healthy pride and grit here. As Gavin put it, 'we are committed to being a resource church in these forgotten towns. These are the places that need resource churches; we can't do it at the detriment of places like this.'

What the church will therefore have to wrestle with is the cost of their planting activity. There is a commonly held idea in the church planting literature and networks that planting brings benefit to the sending congregation. Essentially, so the argument goes, planting is a gospel motivated sacrifice which thus resonates with the pattern of God's working, and which therefore increases life within the sending body. But Gavin is not naïve about how this will play out. The current plan involves running the two sites concurrently but at different times, so that the impact on team and people at the existing congregation is limited. Even in this however, Gavin is well aware of the challenge of person resource. The plant, he admits, will be 'top-heavy'; reliant on the employed ministry team than on congregation members. This, he argues, is simply the nature of being the church in 'this type of a place'.

We need to be alive to the issues that surround planting from, and into, places of limited resource. Gavin and the team will be making decisions about the extent to which they invest in the existing congregation before, alongside, or after starting something new.

### C. Church & Place

Third, Oxclose is a fascinating case study on the way in which churches relate to their place. In one sense, Oxclose is fulfilling the parish vocation beautifully. It is a visible presence in a bounded place. They run a support network for new mothers, a drop in café, and a tots group. They have been wary of Oxclose becoming an attractional church, and they have dissuaded new people from joining the church from other areas. Further, its planting activity is aimed at fulfilling the vision of presence. The vision is to see church being vital again in those ‘forgotten places.’ There is thus an ‘edge’ to this place commitment. Gavin, and the congregation members we spoke with, do not see their place as simply a pond to fish from, but are committed to it in its complexity. They recognise the unique challenges of ministry in Oxclose and other places like it nearby, and they want church to make sense here; for these people.

That said, the challenges of being a truly local church — for Oxclose — are felt. As one congregation member told us, ‘it’s really hard to get people to come from Oxclose.’ Thus, the church engages with the local area, but many – including those who have discovered or rediscovered faith – continue to come from elsewhere. The battle to be more than an attractional church is a hard one. To add further complexity,

the team are also thinking about other places beyond Oxclose. One expression of this is the church’s digital engagement, a legacy of the Covid pandemic. There are currently around 50 people engaged in this online community (WhatsApp groups and Facebook). The vision is to develop these online communities into physical gatherings, meeting across the region and based on where (the currently online) congregants live. In a similar vein, Gavin’s hope is that Oxclose will become a family of churches across the wider region, and the recent move to start small group cells has been to this end.

This vision marks an interesting shift regarding a sense of commitment to place. Oxclose church’s valuing of place is seen in the desire to establish local expressions of church in a multiplicity of places, and not least in more deprived contexts. However, as it embraces these multiple, smaller local expressions it will have to grapple with the loss of the public nature of such a church; something afforded in Oxclose by nature of the fact that the church has a very visible building, as well as good ties with local institutions through Gavin’s ordained role. Oxclose is thus a good example of a church wrestling with what it means to fulfil the parish vocation of local presence within our changing and changed national context. The question is what these new forms of church will look like when they don’t have these same features (ordained leadership, a public building, social capital and given connection with local institutions). Planting may well be one part of the way in which a church becomes more rather than less present. However, it will need to work hard at this, and the temptation is always to retreat: to

establish church in such a way that it is divorced from its place. This is not what we witnessed at Oxclose, but it will be an issue the church will have to wrestle with into the coming years as it begins new churches and expressions in new places.

This is an acute question for new churches. However, Gavin is clear that even the privileges afforded by more established churches such as Oxclose are strained. As an example, Gavin pointed out that the now positive relationship with the local schools has been earned rather than assumed. The church has finally been able to go into the local secondary school after significant resistance, but only on the basis of providing a 'service' — in this case, mental health support provision — rather than because of a given or implicit connection between school and church. This one example highlights the church's task in a secular age beautifully. One clear finding from the example of Oxclose therefore is that, whether a new church or an inherited one, local presence is always enacted rather than given: a truth that our cultural moment has made starker than ever.



**HOPE FOR ALL,  
PENNYWELL**

## Hope For All, Pennywell

Hope For All, Pennywell, defines itself as 'A Modern Church for Modern Times'. They are one of a number of 'Communities of Hope' in Durham Diocese, an initiative to invest in low-income communities to grow the Church, challenge poverty, engage children and young people and care for creation (the four diocesan priorities).<sup>3</sup> According to the Church Urban Fund, the parish which Hope For All serves is the 740th most deprived in England, meaning that it is 'among the most deprived in the country.' The project, launched in October 2020, has transformed St Thomas' Church into a community hub that includes a shop and cafe with reduced prices that make it accessible to anyone who needs food, clothing, or community. Half of the church building has kept its pews, altar and Christian artwork, and Midweek Mass is held there every Wednesday. Many weekly events are run through the project, such as a playgroup (Mucky Pups), a community choir (Bee Tones), a craft group (Knit, Natter and Sew on) and a Bible study (Bible and Cake). Hope for All has over 200 what it calls 'members'—people who have signed up to buy food and receive clothing for £1 a month—and tens of volunteers who support the staff team in running the cafe, shop, and events. They have been chosen as one of Sunderland Mayor's charities and have been featured in the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication's

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://durhamdiocese.org/mission-discipleship-and-ministry-/church-growth/communities-of-hope>

collection of stories of new church communities.<sup>4</sup> As of October 2023, there are around 30 people attending their weekly eucharist service (which has doubled since the start of the project), around 100 weekly users of the shop and cafe, 30 foodbank users, and 40 children and carers at the weekly toddler group.

Without Hope For All, the church in Pennywell would likely have closed. Instead, it is now a community hub open most days of the week. People have come forward to be confirmed, baptised and married. People have a safe space to relax, to buy food and access clothing, and to not be alone. When we interviewed one member of the community and asked what she saw God doing here that excites her, her answer was 'He's working inside me at the minute'. Individuals are experiencing transformation, and people who would not have stepped foot inside a church are coming in through the doors. Clearly, God is at work here. In the theological exploration of Hope For All, we will look at three areas: raising new leaders; social media; and ecclesiology.

### Theological Themes

#### A. Raising New Leaders

Hope For All has had success in raising new leaders. The project itself is led by a member of the congregation at St Thomas' who felt passionate about how God was growing the church in Pennywell and stepped up to lead the new missional opportunity out of her love for God and the

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://ccx.org.uk/content/hope4all/>

community. The project is led by a staff team, but supported by many volunteers who have multiplied as Hope for All has grown. Some people ask to volunteer, others are encouraged to volunteer by the staff and other volunteers who see potential in them, and all are supported through emotional and pastoral support as well as courses they may need, such as safeguarding and food hygiene. One positive way Hope for All raises new leaders is by allowing people to lead in things that they are gifted at: one woman, gifted at knitting, was encouraged to lead a craft club; another began leading a community choir; and another had very little confidence, yet has been empowered to lead a playgroup for children and their parents. We witnessed one woman tell us excitedly that she had been accepted to volunteer at the project: a few months later, she also excitedly told me that she was going to be baptised. Raising new leaders is central to the functioning of Hope For All, practically allowing it to grow and flourish as volunteers run the cafe, shop and events whilst also being a missional opportunity to empower people to step into their God-given gifts and identity as a valued member of God's family.

Hope For All thus prompts a helpful theological question of our praxis of raising new leaders. Following the example of Pennywell, how do we make sure that lay leaders are not merely 'used' as practical resources, but are valued as children of God with vocations to serve and thus depended upon as members of the Church community? Hope For All has developed a culture of raising leaders, and this has been done intentionally. We must, at the very least, ensure that if we are encouraging lay leadership, we are investing in those

leaders: financially, as well as through other means of support such as training and pastoral care. If church plants depend upon raising new leaders—both practically and because that is the calling of the church—then our financial, spiritual and emotional investment should reflect the need to enable, equip, and empower leaders in the community.

How church plants raise new leaders is an important practical and theological question. Theologically, the Church of England claims that raising new leaders is a central role of clergy; to empower Christians to honour their God-gifted abilities and vocations. This is a foundational theme in the ordinal. As the Bishop of Sheffield, Pete Wilcox, explains, even if there were enough clergy to do all the ministry of the church, the role of ordained leaders would still be 'to resource the whole people of God for the whole mission of God, to release all the baptised into the fullness of their baptised vocation, not to be a one-person ministry'.<sup>5</sup> This does not however solve every issue facing the church as it seeks to incorporate greater lay involvement at the level of church leadership. For those from a more sacramental tradition (which includes the likes of the church in Pennywell) there are very live questions here about presidency at the table, and baptism. Hope For All has space for lay leadership because of clergy involvement: what would it look like to try and do church without this clergy involvement?

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<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.sheffield.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/A-Guide-to-Focal-Ministry.pdf>

## B. Social Media

Brian K. M. Mok describes four areas of research into the relationship between Christianity and social media: the intersection between religion and social media; empirical studies into how Christian communities have adapted to social media; pragmatic discussion of how we should engage with social media; and theological reflections on social media.<sup>6</sup> He adds a fifth himself: how social media has changed the public articulation of religious and theological discourse. Church plants are 'public' institutions, dwelling in and for a public context (a place), and as such they must take note of social media, which has transformed the meaning of 'public'. Such a taking note must involve considering not simply *whether*, but *how* social media is used.

Hope For All has a member of staff whose role is 'Business and Media Lead', a large part of which is managing the social media of the project. In an interview he spoke of how social media is 'a product of your intention': it is an asset if used with positive intentions, but dangerous if used poorly. He gave the example of how people are used in social media. Hope For All aim to 'create a safe space for people to enjoy the church and the community' by generally avoiding including people on social media at all because 'we don't want to market them. We don't want to use them as tools to achieve our own gain, our own funding, because we want to treat people with the dignity and respect they deserve.' Hope For All would be entirely different without social media: being established in October 2020 it depended upon social

<sup>6</sup> Mok, B.K., 2021. Public Theology in the Age of Social Media. *International journal of public theology*, 15(3), pp.309-328.

media to tell people about the project, particularly in light of ongoing Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, and they have depended upon social media to attract funding and increase their sustainability as a project, even whilst not using people for marketing. The project lead also sees social media as enabling a spiritual connection: 'It's good to put things like Bible quotes on there as well, because I feel like again it's planting a seed in people, so they can see how that all ties in and relates and that we're not just a project, it is led by God, and it's God in the middle of everything we're doing that is driving this.'

As we continue to explore the practical theology of church planting, we must consider the integral role social media plays in communication, community, and the forming of public thinking today. We must also ensure that we use social media wisely, asking questions such as: how do we use social media to enhance rather than reduce connection? How do we increase the sustainability of our church plants without using our congregation as 'tools', or focusing upon appearing successful? Is it possible, or desirable, to plant a church without social media today? If not, how do we educate church planters to use social media in ways that are not simply effective, but also faithful?

## C. Ecclesiology

Church planting is a practice in ecclesiology. We discern the nature of new churches, how they participate in the story and history of the church and how they fit into the ecclesiology of the Church of England. It is important we pay attention to whether and how new churches are theologically



viable — not in order to fulfil an abstract set of criteria — but so as to ensure that our communities reflect the calling God has placed upon the church in her mission to the world.

### *The Relationship between church and project*

Hope for All defines itself as a church. However there are issues for us to explore regarding this claim, that is, the extent to which and how Hope For All is 'church'. This question is a live one within church planting and pioneering. In the Church of England, it has been at the forefront of ecclesial conversations at least since *Mission Shaped Church*, and the fresh expressions movement. There is no consensus about what makes a church a church in Anglican terms, and there would seem to be a divide between those who tend to define it more in terms of identity and purpose (e.g. the historic four marks; 'up-in-out') and those who look to the church's visible forms (e.g. word and sacrament; worship; liturgy etc.) Those interviewed at Hope for All tended towards the former, with most defining church in relation to loving and serving the community. The project lead is passionate the Hope for All is a church because, in her words, it is 'God in action'. Hope For All thus certainly shares values with most churches: existing for its community, welcoming all in Christ's name, serving etc. However, besides a weekly Bible study, it currently does not have the forms that many might expect of a church, such as gathered public worship, sacraments etc. For example, much has been made of the connection between the shop and café, and the weekly act of eucharist on a Wednesday. This was something picked up in the Gregory Centre piece; a healthy enthusiasm about the

symbiosis between the two, as (so it was stated) people move from the café into worship and back again. On the whole, however, we did not see this happening. Rather, there was a difference between the community who used the café/shop and those attending worship. (There are positive steps towards this being realised more and more). The point being made is not that therefore Hope For All is ineffective, or in any way deficient. It is simply to observe that there is a reasonable question to be asked about how Hope For All is a church in difference to, say, a Christian project or community centre. In this sense, it might be better to describe Hope For All as a social enterprise rather than as a church. This is not the same claim some might make about a sacred/secular divide, i.e. 'what's the difference between this missional activity and a non-Christian charity?' Hope For All is suffused with prayer, and the ministry offered is Christian ministry. The question rather is about the language of church and how that term functions here. Whilst at once wanting to embrace variety in church forms/expressions – so the 'mixed ecology' – we will also need to consider what work we want that word 'church' to do for us; how it functions theologically and in our common discourse.

### *The Importance of Language*

The leadership of Hope For All dislike the term 'church planting'. They believe 'it doesn't sound organically grown'; in some sense artificial, inauthentic, and focused on numerical targets. The business and media lead referred to the term sounding, 'like opening a Starbucks'. When we asked a staff member if there was a better term to describe

Hope For All, he said 'I'd just simply say, we're growing the church—that's all we're doing, growing the church'. The issue of language in starting new things is a live one. The response to the language of 'church-planting' at Hope For All demonstrates just how loaded our terms can become, and how, within their reception in a community, they carry unintended connotations. In semantic terms 'planting' is neutral. Further, it is strange that such an organic metaphor should have become so loaded for the community at Hope For All; communicating the exact opposite of what the language offers. There is work to be done therefore around how our metaphors function within a community, and not least for those like Hope For All that come from a different theological tradition than the majority of planting thinkers and practitioners. Hope For All took initiative in developing their own language, and this of course should be affirmed. However, at the same time, we should recognise how detrimental it would be to the church as body if we were unable to use shared language to describe our mission and ministry, or if one 'part' of the church continued to use language that another part of the church found problematic. We must work hard to ensure that our terms do not become ecclesiastical shibboleths; a test of fidelity to a particular theological position or tradition. It remains to be seen whether the language of planting can be reimaged for all—and especially for those within the Anglo-Catholic tradition—and freed of some of its (albeit often unfair) connotations. Whether that is possible or even a worthwhile task, Hope For All demonstrates that our language matters.

### *History & Revival*

It is significant that the self-definition of Hope For All as church partially comes from identifying against a past, outdated image of church. The tagline for Hope For All on their Facebook page is 'A Modern Church for Modern Times', which one of the priests involved in the project explained by saying 'the Anglican Church has been working in the past for a long, long time. The outlook out there is totally different to Christianity and to God - we've got to find new ways of attracting those people to understand and get to know God.' An image frequently referred to by the staff team and thus a defining moment of the church's story is when the team took down the sharp fences surrounding the church. This was one of the first acts of the new project. For the team, this action was a literal and thus deeply symbolic removing of the barriers between the church and the community outside; a welcoming of everyone.

However, Hope For All work hard to ensure that their 'modernity' is not contrary to Christian tradition. Thus, they understand their work as a return to a Christian tradition of hospitality that they see as having been lost. In this sense, the project has been motivated not so much by 'newness' as a return to what was. When telling the story of Hope For All, the project lead began not two years ago when Hope For All began, but 70 years ago when St Thomas was opened, telling the story of a thriving church at the heart of the community that declined nearly to the point of extinction, but was revitalised by Hope for All. The church was once a hub of the community: it has now become so again. And for them, this story is also God's story, as the project lead explains: 'So we

knew, 'cause it was the 70 year revival of this church, we just feel like that's what this is, it's revival and it's God breathing life back into it.' It is this sense of return that marks the way the team own their Anglican identity. When asked how Hope For All is Anglican, the priest responded (and the project lead agreed) that it is 'probably because it has no boundaries.' The openness to everyone combined with a lack of 'pressure on people' are integral to the ecclesiology of Hope for All, and thus they see themselves very much as living the Anglican vocation in a new way. It is worth noting therefore how motivating this image of revitalising and returning to what was, has been for the community. Planting discourse is often marked by a tone of 'newness'. In many communities and places, what will in fact enthuse mission will be a rediscovery and reclaiming of an old mission/ministry for a new time.

#### *Ecclesiology and the Possibility of Sharing the Task*

A key theological implication from the exploration of Hope For All's ecclesiology is the importance for any church plant of having a clear ecclesiology, a story of what the church is and why the church is. The significance does not come from formal statements of ecclesiology, but from an inhabited 'sense' of what and why church is, which in turn shapes all that they do, and unites the team and volunteers and wider community around a shared vision of serving people through the love of God. Hope For All do very much have this. A critical question in the Church of England's church planting therefore is how we can encourage all traditions to plant churches given the diversity of ecclesial visions across the one church. That is, is it possible to have a

joined-up planting strategy — say at a diocesan or deanery level — if there is not a shared ecclesiology across the different churches? Can different Anglican traditions work together in planting, or are our ecclesiologies so different that we should encourage each church to plant in its discrete way rather than seeking close cooperation? Some may well argue that it should not be ecclesiology but *context* that defines the church plant. There is good wisdom in this of course, however our research suggests just how significant and determinative a particular church's ecclesiology is to even the basic task of listening to context: what we see and hear is shaped very much by the ecclesial and theological presuppositions we bring to the context. If we are therefore wanting to offer planting as a shared task, spanning the traditions of the church, then it will be worth asking what we have in common that would allow for such a sharing. Scriptures, tradition, cultural analysis will all be part of this. What are our common ecclesial commitments, which might allow us to at least agree to the premise of starting new things or reviving old ones, even if each expression then looks very different from others?



## 4. AFTERWORD

## Shaping Place: Ecclesiology Embodied

This is the first, of what I hope will be many, pieces of research arising from the Centre for Church Planting Theology and Research. My thanks go to Revd Dr Will Foulger and his team for this important work. I will conclude by reflecting on three themes arising from this research, which I hope will raise important questions for future work.

First, the four contexts explored in this research exemplify the importance of theological work which is rooted in the context of what is happening *on the ground*. Sadly, at times, the rhetoric around 'planting vs. parish' in the Church of England can be abstract and disengaged from what is happening in communities. The reality, as we have seen, is far more complex. Where church planting begins and parish ministry ends is not so easy to determine. For example, Vine Church is a BMO (i.e. non-parish community) which is deeply rooted in its local context, in a way that mirrors many of the commitments of typical parish ministry to space, community, and sacrament. Contrastingly, Hope For All has emerged from within traditional parish structures, but raises ecclesiological questions about the limits of what a church is and how different communities engage with one another within the same space. Thus, while I do not expect everyone will agree with the theological conclusions drawn from these contexts, I hope this research has highlighted the importance of specificity in reflecting on these vital questions around church polity, structure and governance. Ecclesiology must be embodied.

Secondly, a theme which has emerged from each of the four reflections is the importance of language. In St Paul's church, this focused on the resistance of the label 'church revitalisation', in favour of 'church resurrection'. In Oxclose, questions emerged around what it means to be a 'resourcing' church. Language matters. Not only for outsiders, like ourselves, seeking to understand and learn from different contexts. But also, more pertinently, for those inside, seeking bring meaning to what God is doing in their communities. Language allows us to narrate the stories of communities in which God is at work. Some language seeks to create borders and divide, other language aims to create bridges within communities.

More generally, our language around church planting reveals something of the theological commitments we hold and stories we tell. Should the Church of England's priority to 'starting 10,000 new Christian communities' include church grafts like St Paul's? Or would this overlook the congregation already present? While social enterprises like Hope for All, and BMOs like Vine Church, are clearly 'Christian communities', should we resist calling these 'anglican churches'? No doubt, there are strong feelings on both sides of the debate. In short, there is a vital need for conceptual clarity in narrating the next phase of this church planting movement in the Church of England. While this may raise difficult questions, these are important to confront if we are to think clearly and theologically about what God is doing in the midst of these communities of hope in this country.

Lastly, and relatedly, this task of embodied ecclesiology which seeks to take language seriously in narrating the work

of God's mission, is deeply theological but not always very theologically engaged. Questions about context and language can be at risk of remaining superficial. We might refine our use of terminology to tell the most inclusive stories of church growth, but we must also acknowledge that our use of language reflects a deeper reality. Namely, the reality of God's church, Christ's body, and our participation in it as individuals and local communities.

The research which has begun with this report raises complex theological questions about what the church is and how it is constituted. It asks questions regarding the importance of gathering communities of people around places, the role of sacraments in the life of the Church, the nature of mission and its relationship to social action, to name but a few.

But while these four contexts may be new, these questions are not. Moreover, the United Kingdom is home to some of the brightest theological minds in the world, with a long history of contributing to theological debate. The ongoing conversation about church planting is sometimes divorced from this tradition, both historically and in its contemporary forms. My hope is that the activities of the Centre for Church Planting Theology and Research go some way to narrowing this gap, not in the sake of generating more 'interesting theological research', but ultimately, so that the church may flourish in its depth of knowledge and love of God, and its witnessing of this love to our communities.

Revd Dr Joshua Cockayne, Director of the Centre for Church Planting Theology and Research, November 2023.

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