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How do Baptists discern the 'mind of Christ' at the Church Meeting?

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How do Baptists discern 'the mind of Christ' at the Church Meeting?

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Chester for the degree of Doctor of Professional Studies in Practical Theology.

By Ruth Elizabeth Moriarty

8 September 2023

Contents

Statement by the student	6
Acknowledgments	7
Abstract	8
Summary of Portfolio	9
<u>1. Introduction</u>	11
Discerning the mind of Christ defined by scripture and tradition	12
History of the Baptist Church and Church Meeting	14
Current research is limited to historical overviews and reflections on Baptist identity	15
Shared heritage of discernment: Baptists and the Religious Society of Friends	17
Historic theological preferences limit research into Baptist practice	18
Practical Theology and reflecting on the Church Meeting	20
The experience of attending and observing a Church Meeting	21
Discernment as Christian practical wisdom	21
Comparing Baptist slow wisdom and Brueggemann's slow wisdom	23
Overview of thesis	23
<u>2. Qualitative research and Practical Theology: A Baptist approach</u>	26
A Baptist approach to qualitative research	26
Research design shaped by a 'community of practice'	27
Mixed methods: Observation and interviews	28
Uncovering cross-contextual generalities: use of stratified sampling	30
Flexible interviewing method	31
Ethical considerations: caring for participants, anonymity, relationality as a practitioner-researcher	32
Fieldwork review: refining participant advertising and recruitment	36
Recording group meetings and resolving transcribing problems	37
Thematic and Axial Coding	38
<u>3. 'This body life': A history of Baptist discernment</u>	42

History of the Baptist Church	43
Persecution forges a distinctive identity for Baptists	46
History of the Church Meeting	47
Biblical image of the church: the body of Christ	49
Biblical image of the church: the priesthood of all believers	50
‘This body life’ today: Democracy and the Priesthood of All Believers	52
Voting and the Church Meeting	54
Impact of discernment development	55
<u>4. ‘Slow’ Wisdom: a Baptist practice of discernment</u>	57
Baptist discernment is slow	57
Patterns of prayer and discernment at the Church Meeting	58
Extempore prayer embodies Baptist theological beliefs	59
Intercessory prayer indicates the covenantal nature of Church Meeting	60
Prayer as testing discernment	61
Ignatian discernment and slow wisdom	62
Discernment and epistemology	63
Discernment as embodied Christian practical wisdom	65
Slow wisdom and bell hooks’ practical wisdom	69
Embodied slow wisdom found in prophetic participation	70
Prophetic participation and bell hooks’ engaged pedagogy	73
<u>5. ‘Slow’ Wisdom: listening, hearing and consensus agreement</u>	76
Listening to the body of Christ	76
Hearing into action	77
Using small groups	78
Pastoral Care at Gates	79
Mulled wine and the carol service at Coleman	80
Dialogue in the World Council of Churches and slow wisdom	81
A radical place: the classroom and the Church Meeting	83
Consensus	86
Defining consensus for Baptists	86
Examples of consensus as seeking agreement	88
Examples of consensus building techniques	89

<u>6. ‘One leg in, one leg out’: reflecting on the participation of younger members and members from other denominations</u>	92
Absent younger members at the Church Meeting	92
Determining the age of younger members	93
Research regarding young people’s church attendance	94
Best practice: Moving the Church Meeting	95
Research regarding young people’s engagement with Christianity	96
Members from other denominations	97
<u>7. ‘Too Black’: reflecting on racism and the Church Meeting</u>	100
Social context: Demographic changes in London	100
Encountering Whiteness	102
Racism and the Church Meeting: difference in expression	102
Sample axial coding	104
Difference in theology	104
Presence of Prosperity Theology in Baptist churches	106
Power at the Church Meeting	107
Theological analysis of structural racism: Willie Jennings	108
<i>After Whiteness</i> enables change in new contexts	112
‘Design’ and the Church Meeting	114
Comparing slow wisdom and Jennings’ structural analysis of racism	116
Small groups increase belonging at the Church Meeting	117
<u>8. Conclusion</u>	119
Articulation of practice: Slow wisdom	119
Impact of expressing discernment as slow wisdom for excluded members	120
Expanded knowledge through qualitative research and Practical Theology	121
Generating a new Baptist approach to Practical Theology and qualitative research	122
Engaging with Receptive Ecumenism	122
Slow wisdom beyond the Church Meeting	124
<u>Appendix</u>	126
1 Church Participant Information	126
2 Church Participant Consent form	129

3 Individual Participant Information	131
4 Individual Participant Consent form	133
5 Volunteer contact form	134
6 Revised volunteer contact form	135
Bibliography	136-147
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Statement by the student

The material being presented for examination is my own work and has not been submitted for an award of this or another HEI except in minor particulars which are explicitly noted in the body of the thesis. Where research pertaining to the thesis was undertaken collaboratively, the nature and extent of my individual contribution has been made explicit.

Signed:

Date: 8 September 2023

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Abstract

How do Baptists discern the mind of Christ at the Church Meeting?

Ruth Moriarty

At the heart of every Baptist church is the Church Meeting, where church members make decisions for their local congregation by discerning the mind of Christ. As a Baptist minister, I operate as a practitioner-researcher in this project by observing four local Baptist churches in north London and interviewing twelve members on the practice of discernment. As a relatively unexamined area of church life, this project aims to articulate Baptist discernment to renew the Church Meeting.

Through the data collected and analysed by thematic and axial coding, Baptist discernment is identified, articulated, and named as *slow wisdom*. Slow wisdom is slow, listens to all members, and seeks consensus agreement through a prayerful and prophetic atmosphere. The theological emphasis on participation, described as 'this body life' is shown to be based on biblical images of the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.4-27) as the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2.4-5). By comparing slow wisdom to bell hooks' practical wisdom (1994, 2003, 2010), slow wisdom finds broader terms of expression and rationale for participation and the Church Meeting is recast as a radical place. Slow wisdom uses embodied knowledge to form Christian practical wisdom (Miller-McLemore, 2016) that long-standing members use as an epistemological source to verify discernment. Therefore, knowledge of Baptist discernment is expanded from a biblical basis to recognise phronesis in the lived experience of faith and bodily practice of attending the Church Meeting as fundamental to discernment.

Slow wisdom is not present when the Church Meeting fails to listen to all members. The project shows how members who are different to the habitual norm of the church are excluded. The low attendance of younger members and members from other denominations is shown to be effectively addressed by examples of best practices, alongside the project recommendation of sharing slow wisdom as a model for reflection. To explore Black and Brown members whose voices have been overruled in Church Meetings, Willie Jennings' (2010, 2020) work on challenging racism in education provides a contrasting analysis. Through Jennings' example, the project demonstrates how the design of the Church Meeting can be changed to be inclusive of all members to increase belonging among Black and Brown members. Having articulated slow wisdom, this new knowledge contributes to other denominations' discernment approaches and provides a pathway for renewal of practice and a revitalisation of the Baptist Church Meeting for Baptists.

Summary of Portfolio

The portfolio submitted before this thesis shows a reflective research journey in Practical Theology as a Baptist minister. At the beginning of the professional doctorate programme, my research question concerned a critical discussion held at my first church in London. At the Church Meeting, church members shared their different views regarding whether the church building was a sacred space. My focus throughout the programme has been to understand how Baptists hear varied opinions and make decisions together at the Church Meeting.

In my literature review, I examined the concept of churches as sacred spaces and places in Baptist research and other Christian traditions. By using a modified pastoral cycle, I reflected on the critical Church Meeting discussion, followed by an exploration of biblical models of revelation, churches understood as storied and incarnational places, and sociology and place. The review highlighted that while the content of the original discussion on sacred places was important, the context of the Church Meeting in which it was held was critical for Baptists.

For my publishable article, I reviewed a contrasting sample of literature on unholy places. Now in my second pastorate in Cheshire, I explored 'Mischief Night' and the practice of charismatic Christians to prayer walk outdoors to reclaim the local streets from an unholy environment into a sacred place. I identified parallels between Baptist charismatic views regarding place and Celtic views on liminal places. I argued that determining good from evil through testing in prayer was believed by Baptists as a factor in discernment practice on Mischief Night.

To complete the first stage of the professional doctorate, I returned to reflecting on decision-making within the Church Meeting to form the basis of my research proposal. Now in my third pastorate, I sought to make generalisations about the practice of discernment for Baptists at the Church Meeting. I selected a qualitative research approach to analyse a set of Baptist churches using the tools of observation, interviewing and coding. With a concern to express the lived experience of faith for Baptists, these methods were chosen to generate fresh data concerning an unarticulated discernment practice to existing discernment literature. I sought to articulate how Baptists discern together at the Church Meeting with an interest in revelation, testing or judging good decisions in discernment, the role of prayer and the significance of the Church Meeting for members.

The project began with a specific question of revelation and sacred space in a multi-ethnic Baptist church. Through stage one, a broader topic emerged of how Baptists search for

revelation from God to make decisions together which led to the final research question of 'How do Baptists discern the mind of Christ at the Church Meeting?'

1. Introduction

Fiona: And it was after that meeting ... or was it another; over the years there have been so many, that's when two ladies of my age said: 'That's it! We're never going to go to another Church Meeting' because they are just horrible places, and people say nasty things to each other. And you know...

Ruth: You described it as a wretched Church Meeting?

Fiona: It is wretched, it is horrible. It's not what it is designed for, that's not Baptists discerning the will of God when you go to do that because I don't believe that's the way God expects us to work with him and how he will guide us through the next steps. That is not how you do it.

Fiona is one of twelve participants from four sample churches in this qualitative research project into the practice of discernment at the Baptist Church Meeting. She is a chatty middle-aged White¹ woman originally from Derbyshire, a Christian college administrator and former trustee from Coleman Baptist Church. Fiona's home displayed numerous family photographs, a collection of palm crosses and hanging decorations with spiritual mottos. In our interview, she vividly recounted a 'wretched' Church Meeting where a member raised a proposal that a youth worker's contract should not be renewed because she had failed to answer an email. Fiona attributes the non-attendance of members at a Church Meeting to conflict regarding the youth worker. Fiona raises the challenge of how to discern God's guidance in a positive manner at a Church Meeting.

In this thesis, I demonstrate that Baptists can discern through time-consuming meetings, prayer, prophetic leading of the Spirit, listening to and hearing all members and seeking consensus agreement through small group work. Further, I show that Baptists use embodied Christian practical wisdom to verify discernment as a lived expression of faith rooted in Baptist theological principles of the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.4-27) and as the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2.4-5). I name this wisdom: *slow wisdom*.

I argue that if slow wisdom is used, the Church Meeting is changed from wretched to a beautiful and radical expression of Baptist faith and practice. This research articulates slow wisdom as a practice of discernment for Baptists, identifies issues of inclusion to address and

¹I have capitalised Black, Brown and White to engage with a form of orthographic justice which 'consciously chooses to capitalize Black, Brown, Indigenous, and White, we can take a small step towards a more just and inclusive world.' (MacArthur Foundation, 2020).

makes recommendations for change from contrasting educational settings and using best practice models observed in sample churches.

In this introductory chapter, I define what discerning the mind of Christ is understood to be for Baptists and provide a brief history of the Baptists and the Church Meeting. I offer a review of current discernment research and a comparison to the discernment practice of the Religious Society of Friends. A short analysis of why the area is under-researched is offered. I highlight the beneficial community of practice within the professional doctorate programme at the University of Chester. With these introductory sections complete, I provide a thick description of an observed Church Meeting. The lived experience of Baptist discernment practice is reflected on through Practical Theology. Christian practical wisdom and phronesis are explored as a basis for understanding Baptist discernment. It concludes with a chapter-by-chapter summary of the thesis.

Discerning the mind of Christ defined by scripture and tradition

For Baptists, scripture and tradition form the basis of discerning the mind of Christ which is now formalised in charitable governance structures as recommended by the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB). The terminology of the mind of Christ is echoed in the Pauline phrase of 1 Corinthians 2.14-16:

¹⁴ The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. ¹⁵The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, ¹⁶ for, “Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

Discernment in this sense invokes the presence of the Holy Spirit to make divine judgments or decisions regarding any matter considered at the Church Meeting. Seeking the mind of Christ is understood as a communal practice as Nigel Wright (1990) explains in a general introduction leaflet for members:

Congregations are self-governing in that the whole congregation is invited to seek the mind and will of God for the good of the church. This is one reason why a church needs a body of identifiable members. It is these people, who have declared their commitment to the local congregation and have demonstrated their Christian discipleship, who are qualified to share in the task of discerning God’s will (p. 1).

When Baptists say they have discerned the mind of Christ at the Church Meeting, I argue Baptists believe they have sought God’s guidance for the direction of the church. For example, in the 1948 ‘The Baptist Doctrine of the Church’ statement made by BUGB describes the Church Meeting as, ‘the occasion when, as individuals and as a community, we submit ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and stand under the judgements of God what we may know what is the mind of Christ’ (cited in West, 1960, p. 15). Alongside the 1948 statement, sits the Declaration of Principle (BUGB, 1873, refined in 1904, 1906, and 1938) which each sample church in this study affirms. It states:

1. That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.
2. That Christian Baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who 'died for our sins according to the Scriptures; was buried, and rose again the third day'.
3. That it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelization of the world.

Through affirming the Declaration of Principle, Baptist churches take responsibility and liberty to interpret the law of Christ, which is seen in the activity of the Church Meeting through discerning the mind of Christ.

Local Baptist churches are principally governed through the Church Meeting. As a movement of over 2000 local Baptist churches, BUGB churches are self-governing and self-supporting, and affiliate with BUGB only for wider purposes and mission programmes. Every local church has a membership system where members gather at the Church Meeting to govern the congregation: ‘Church Members shall meet together in a Church Members’ Meeting under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and under the Lordship of Christ to discern the mind of God² in the affairs of the Church’ (BUGB, 2018).

² The phrases ‘mind of God’ and ‘mind of Christ’ are used interchangeably by project participants, for example, Stephen minister at Gates said: ‘We discern the heart and mind of God’ and ‘if we dare to discern the mind of Christ as a body of people, we will ask probing questions’. While Baptist scholar Nigel Wright (1990) and BUGB governance documents (2018) use the ‘mind of God’, for this thesis, the mind of ‘Christ’ is used to reflect the 1948 *The Baptist Doctrine of the Church* issued by BUGB which correlates to the BUGB Declaration of Principle (1873).

The Church Meeting is a necessary function of Baptist governance structures, as seen in a standard constitution for Baptist churches becoming a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO):

The Church Members' Meeting shall have reserved authority in the appointment and removal of a Minister, the appointment and removal of Charity Trustees, decisions related to church property including (without limitation) any purchase, sale, lease, mortgage, or redevelopment of property, the administration of the membership list, and the closure of the Church (BUGB, 2008, clause 9.2).

Scripture provided the terminology 'discerning the mind of Christ', tradition generated the practice of discernment and now both are included as the decision-making procedure for Baptist churches as CIOs.

History of the Baptist Church and Church Meeting

The emergence of the Baptist Church is a disputed account among Baptists. However, the development of the Church Meeting uses theological principles of the gathered church and the priesthood of all believers widely held across Baptist churches. In this study, I follow the accounts offered by Ernest Payne (1944), William Lumpkin (1959) and Roger Hayden (2005). Payne, Lumpkin and Hayden argue that the Baptist church in England began in the era of the Reformation with a congregation from Gainsborough in 1608. Led by John Smyth, the congregation moved to Amsterdam in 1609 for fear of persecution in England. The first Baptist churches, connected to the Separatist movement were 'known to exist by 1620 in Lincoln, Coventry, Salisbury, Tiverton and London' (Hayden, 2005, p. 25). Paul Fiddes (2006) highlights another trend seen in American theologian James McClendon who uses 'baptist' rather than 'Baptist' meaning 'a certain approach to faith and life rooted in the Radical Reformation and which is actualized, however imperfectly, in a wide range of communities' (2006, p. 13). However, Holmes (2012) emphasizes that some American Baptists believe their ecclesiology is 'the true (Baptist) churches, founded by Jesus [which were] driven underground by oppression from false churches' (p. 3). Therefore, Baptist churches can be historically connected to the changing church culture of the Reformation, expressed in a variety of church communities in a baptistic mode or understood as the truest expression of ecclesiology founded in Christ. The historical evidence provided by Payne, Lumpkin and Hayden is persuasive for this study of BUGB churches.

In terms of the Church Meeting, the text of the London Confession of 1644 provides a written indication that the Church Meeting reflects a Baptist theological conviction that all Christians

are part of the priesthood of all believers, by referencing 1 Peter 2.5 ‘That all believers are a holy and ¹sanctified people’ (1644, reproduced Lumpkin, 1959, p. 164). Early meeting minutes of Meetings show a model of discernment where all members of a Baptist Church make decisions together as they discern the mind of Christ. For example, at Colchester Baptist Church on 29 July 1708, the first Church Meeting was held. It was agreed that no persons could be called into office ‘without consent of all that walk orderly and peaceably among us’ (Cited Spyvee, 1989, p. 21), indicating that communal agreement was a key organising principle for founding members.

Current research is limited to historical overviews and reflections on Baptist identity

Despite the centrality of discernment, it is a relatively unexplored part of Baptist church life. Two pamphlets exist: *Baptist Basics 6: The Church Meeting* (Wright, 1990) and *Healthy Church Meetings* (Jump, 2007) regarding the role of discernment and the Church Meeting. Historic examples of practical guides (West, 1960; Bacon, 1981, 1984) offer basic guidelines for how to conduct the procedures of the Meeting e.g., voting. Baptist theologians have written individual chapters related to the Church Meeting included in books about the broader question of identity for Baptists (Fiddes, 2006; Haymes, Gouldbourne and Cross, 2008). Mostly, these are historical and are explored in greater depth in Chapter 3. In terms of Baptist identity and the Church Meeting, Fiddes (2006) argues that covenant theology from the 17th century shaped the Church Meeting where the role of members is to ‘watch over each other’ (p. 29). Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne and Anthony Cross (2008) provide an historical overview of authority in the church and by the state. Haymes et al (2008) affirm the role of church members listening to each other to be ‘faithful to Christ in Church Meetings’ (p. 52).

Meanwhile, the experience of the Church Meeting is described as ‘tedious and irrelevant’ (Holmes, 2011, p. 173) or ‘the nadir of church life’ (Bacon, 1984, p. 29). However, Stephen Holmes (2011) also argues that a Baptist vision of the church upholds a focus on both the individual through believers’ baptism and on the community of faith through the primacy of the local church and congregational church government. Holmes (2011) identifies the historically subversive nature of votes for all members at the Church Meeting as a prophetic act. Holmes (2011) summarises that current literature on Baptist discernment is limited and states that:

An anthropological study examining the practice of the church meeting in several different fellowships would be valuable but to the best of my knowledge does not exist (p. 183).

This thesis offers a qualitative study of the practice of discernment to address the knowledge gap identified by Holmes.

In terms of reflecting on the practice of discernment, Nancy Bedford (2002) argues for additional Saturday discernment meetings to the Church Meeting to attract a broader range of participants with a new focus on the Holy Spirit's leading. As a leader of Iglesia Bautista Betel church in Buenos Aires, Bedford describes new discernment meetings as a type of pilgrimage (2002, p. 180). With a changing economic situation, the church became financially vulnerable. Bedford argues:

This allowed greater openness to the Holy Spirit's voice (sometimes heard in the voices of children and of the very old) and a greater empathy for those whose needs are even more pronounced than their own (2002, p. 173).

In Bedford's work, hearing God speak is critical to effective discernment. In part, the story of Betel echoes the UK Baptist church practice of 'Special Church Meetings' which are extraordinary meetings to discern a specific item, e.g., calling a minister. In this project, participant churches often employed additional discernment models for difficult decisions either through group discussion with the existing Church Meeting or at a separate occasion. I argue that slow wisdom relies on listening to all members and small group work to facilitate members' participation, therefore Bedford's emphasis on participation resonates with this project.

The impact of limited Baptist research drives Baptist churches to use discernment resources from outside the denomination. For example, Baptist theologians Stuart Murray Williams and Sian Murray Williams (2012) look to the Society of Friends and recommend the use of silence to discern as a practice from which is 'well-known for gatherings in which listening often predominates over speaking as members of the community wait for the prompting of the Spirit before contributing' (p. 115). They also praise 'Open to God' the discernment training resource from the Baptist Union of Victoria, Australia (2009) which highlights the importance of small groups in discernment but also uses methods and terminology that echo the Society of Friends discernment regarding consensus, for example 'standing aside' (p. 55).

Existing literature on the Church Meeting from Baptist theologians and practitioners has concentrated on operational guidance, the historical roots of Baptist identity and the role of

covenant in Baptist theology and practice at the Church Meeting. A guide on how to discern the mind of Christ is not readily found in these sources. Therefore, this thesis offers a fresh contribution to this field of literature by articulating slow wisdom as a model of Baptist discernment and analysing of current discernment practice in Baptist churches for the renewal of the Church Meeting.

Shared heritage of discernment: Baptists and the Religious Society of Friends

The Religious Society of Friends (Quaker) and Baptists share a similar model of congregational governance. Both groups use a gathered regular meeting of members (Baptist) or Friends (Quaker) to discern God's will together. This can be attributed to the shared roots of Quaker and Baptist traditions connected through the influences of John Smyth and George Fox (Sheeran, 1983, p. 125) and Separatist convictions on worship and ministry (Davie, 1997, p. 18). Both traditions believe that every member can discern the mind of Christ when gathered together. Baptists can use a simple majority vote of members to decide at a Church Meeting. However, Quakerism emphasises the pursuit of unity over consensus among Friends. As the Quaker Faith and Practice book of discipline states:

In all our meetings for church affairs we need to listen together to the Holy Spirit. We are not seeking consensus; we are seeking the will of God. The unity of the meeting lies more in the unity of the search than in the decision that is reached. We must not be distressed if our listening involves waiting, perhaps in confusion, until we feel clear what God wants done (1995, p. 2.89).

In Quaker meetings for church affairs, agenda items to be considered are proposed preliminarily and at a later stage whereby the clerk would propose a tentative minute 'embodying the sense of the meeting' (Sheeran, 1983, p. 65). At this point, several options are available to Friends to agree or dissent by either stating 'I disagree but do not wish to stand in the way', 'I stand aside', 'Please minute me as opposed', 'I am unable to unite with the proposal' (Sheeran, 1983, p. 66-69). If no unity can be found, then the decision is delayed by several months. A moratorium is offered where agreement cannot be achieved. The Quakers also make provision for other modes of discernment on pastoral or personal matters in small groups for church life, such as a meeting for clearness (Quaker Faith and Practice, 1995, p. 12.20-26). A clearness meeting (Brown, 2017) is focussed on discerning an individual's impending decision, examples include considering marriage or exploring a new spiritual direction. At a clearness meeting, several Friends gather at the individual's request, and then by using questions, the group help the individual to discern the best course of action. Baptists and the Society of Friends share a dissenting heritage of communal discernment, yet Quakers

primarily seek unity and offer detailed methods for discernment techniques for individual and communal purposes.

A core difference between Quaker and Baptist forms of discernment is voting. Baptists vote on important decisions such as calling a new minister. Baptist Church Meetings typically process voting on agenda items according to Robert's Rules. Robert's Rules were created in 1863 by USA Army officer Henry Martyn Robert who was frustrated at the 'inept ways in which meetings were conducted in his American Baptist church' (Morris and Olsen, 2012, p. 27). Based on Jefferson's Rules for the United States Congress, Robert 'drew on his experience in the army and on parliamentary procedure and published his rules in 1876' (Wilkerson-Hayes, 2007, p. 1). Robert standardised the rules of meeting 'for use in various religious and civic settings so that people would be familiar with a consistent method of making decisions' (Morris and Olsen, 2012, p. 28). This effect is noted by Sian Murray Williams and Stuart Murray Williams (2012):

We recall residents' association meetings in Oxford that were indistinguishable from a typical Baptist church members' meeting, except there was no opening or closing prayer (p. 106).

Typical Baptist procedures provide a method of appointing a chair and processing agenda items. Proposals are introduced to the Meeting, followed by time for discussion. Then a seconder is asked for and members are asked to vote (for, against or abstain). A simple majority is acceptable for a proposal to be agreed upon. However, voting does not occur in Quaker Meetings for two reasons: it is seen as divisive in the community and in order to pursue total unity, as Green (2023) outlines: 'Unity sits at the heart of Quaker decision-making, following what earlier Quakers called 'gospel order'. Unity is held precious as a condition of God's peaceable kingdom' (Section 4.1). Both denominations struggle with the misconception that communal discernment is democratic (Sheeran, 1983, p. 79) as every member or Friend's voice is valued equally in making decisions. For Baptists, this problem is particularly acute when the individual right to vote is held above the responsibility to listen to God and each other (Haymes et al, 2008, p. 51-53). Both denominations are seeking to discern God's will through gathering together. The Quakers prefer silence to set the tone of listening to each other and God, while Baptists listen similarly but utilise voting for discerning key decisions.

Historic theological preferences limit research into Baptist practice

The Church Meeting and Baptist discernment are under-researched for several possible reasons. Holmes (2012) argues that there is limited variety in Baptist academic research due to Baptist historical preferences in scholarship and a general emphasis on activism in ministry. However, this thesis uses the opportunity of combining qualitative research and Practical Theology provided by the Doctorate of Professional Studies programme in Practical Theology (DProf) to expand research on Baptist discernment. Holmes (2012) argues that Baptist theologians have typically been either biblical specialists e.g., H. Wheeler Robinson and Ron Clements or historians W.T. Whitley and David Bebbington (p. 57). Furthermore, Holmes states that Baptists have often been diverted away from academia:

The energy of English Baptists in the 19th century was being poured into social and political issues. From emancipation and voting reform to prison and poor law reform ... Thoughtful Baptists were engaged in local church ministry, and so finding practical ways of living out the gospel; the luxury of philosophical reflection was not one they allowed themselves (2012, p. 58).

The history of Baptist engagement with the academy and the emphasis on the activity of ministry may have limited research into discernment practice. Stephen Parker (1996) identifies similar themes of a restricted academic gaze and focus on pastoral ministry through his analysis of the Pentecostal tradition and discernment. He argues that 'Pentecostals tried to refute 'it's just experience' by a swing to exegesis and historical studies' (1996, p. 9) and identifies that the funding for research was given by conservative evangelical sources who steered the choices of academic subjects (Ibid, p. 10). Parker identifies that the historic academic approach 'tended to neglect or even contradict the centrality of 'experience' in Pentecostal faith and life' (1996, p. 10). This rationale provided by Parker (1996) mirrors the Baptist history of academic work and offers similar conclusions to Holmes (2012). Elaine Graham (2019) roots the theological study preferences shown by Parker and Holmes with Friedrich Schleiermacher whom she argues presented:

A threefold structure of philosophical, historical and practical theologies. This gave a hierarchy of knowledge ... in this way of thinking, pastoral care and Christian ministry were not regarded as generative of theological insight, but were merely applications of truth found within systematic theology (2019, p. 3).

The lack of academic reflection on practice (Holmes, 2012), and on experience (Parker, 1996) may reflect a hierarchy of knowledge preferred and valued by the academy (Graham, 2019). Each of these observations indicates why the practice of Baptist discernment is under-researched.

However, the DProf in Practical Theology has afforded practitioner-researchers to offer reflection on practice. As a trainee Baptist minister at Regent's Park College, I undertook an MTh in Applied Theology in 2005. The course is still offered to students and is 'designed to enable theological reflection upon experience in pastoral practice' (University of Oxford MTh Applied Theology, 2023). Notably, the course retains the name 'Applied Theology' which Elaine Graham (2019) identifies as a form of early Practical Theology that 'began as supplying practical training for ordained ministers' (p. 2); similar views are expressed by Stephen Pattison (2007), but that the field of Practical Theology has now been revised and understood as 'a theology of practice' (Graham, 2019, p. 3). I joined the DProf programme at the University of Chester; two years after it was created. I was granted funding for further study by BUGB on the DProf programme. The Further Studies Fund run by BUGB encourages all ministers to undertake theological study after ministerial training but does not set specific research topic parameters. The DProf programme offers an important combination of being able to conduct both qualitative research and study Practical Theology. It is through the relatively new combination of these two streams of study at Chester that this project can make an original contribution to the field of knowledge on discernment.

Practical Theology and reflecting on the Church Meeting

Practical Theology offers a way of reflecting on the concrete experience of the Church Meeting and discernment because it is a discipline that:

Focuses on the life of the whole people of God in the variety of its witness and service, as it lives in, with and for the world. It asks questions concerning Christian understanding, insight and obedience in the concrete reality of our existence (Ballard and Pritchard, 1996, p. 27).

Practical Theology takes 'contemporary people's experiences seriously as data for theological reflection' (Pattison and Woodard, 2000, p. 15), to understand lived faith and its performance 'in an interpretative context' (Swinton and Mowat, 2016, p. 6). Therefore, in this thesis, I show how experience is critical to understanding and improving the Church Meeting and has led to the conclusions drawn. For Baptists, faith in Christ leads us to the belief in a gathered church as the body of Christ. These theological beliefs are performed through the participation of members in discernment. I hope that the articulation of slow wisdom from the views of Baptists will foster a new era of reforming practice by delighting in discernment and sharing slow wisdom with new members.

The experience of attending and observing a Church Meeting

Gathering project data began with the observation Gates Baptist Church Meeting. From my research log, I noted:

I arrived at the first sample church, straight after leading and preaching at a Sunday service at Christ Church (my Baptist/URC church nearby). I was warmly greeted by a member who gave me fruit juice and a generous slice of a triple-layer chocolate ganache cake adorned with gold fondant icing with a filigree leaf pattern. The start of the meeting was a chaotic affair while the remains of the 'bring and share' lunch were being cleared away. We met in a large pale pink hall adjacent to the church with air conditioning fans whirring noisily overhead. The chairs were laid out in the largest horseshoe shape possible for the space. Families and children were present, a mother nursed a gurgling baby to one side, while several older and less physically able members were in attendance. 30 people were seated by 2 p.m., which is approximately a third of the attendees of the church.

The meeting opened in prayer, and then the children left for a crèche facility being staffed by the male members of the diaconate; I had never seen a crèche run like this before. Different deacons introduced agenda items using PowerPoint presentations. The items discussed were the pastoral care of members not attending church, finance, safeguarding adults at risk, the appointment of family worker, church signage, a malfunctioning lift and a redecoration plan for ancillary rooms. At several points, the meeting broke for discussion, prayer, stretch breaks, sung worship and almost everyone spoke.

As a qualitative project, observation of discernment provided an insight into the lived experience of the Church Meeting. As a minister of three different Baptist churches over 16 years, I have seen the highs and lows of discernment with a breadth of experience from Fiona's wretched Church Meeting where this chapter began to Gates' positive vision of inclusive discernment above. The observed experience of the Gates Church Meeting contributes valuable Practical Theology data, I identify slow wisdom seen in participation fostered by fellowship and good food, the use of prayer, worship and multiple members leading and contributing to discernment.

Discernment as practice and Christian practical wisdom

From this observation, I argue that the practice of discernment is a form of Christian practical wisdom within the field of Practical Theology. Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass (2002) state that Christian practices are 'things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ' (p. 18). Discernment is an inherently practical endeavour as the Baptist Basics leaflet outlines:

The members gather together in the name of Christ to make the most important decisions, such as receiving new members, caring for property and the calling and appointing of leaders,

including ministers. It is the members who will work together to sustain the church in its life and mission (Wright, 1990, p. 1).

As discernment is a practice of Baptists, I suggest it displays a form of Christian practical wisdom. Christian practical wisdom is seen in communities where ‘it shows up in a kind of good judgment they are able to put into play in a particular time and place, sometimes as if by second nature’ (Bass, Cahalan, Miller-McLemore, Nieman and Scharen, 2016, p. 1). Christian practical wisdom offers a framework for interpreting the world:

The circumstances in which human beings live are always concrete, conflicted and in flux those who seek to live faithfully, we must necessarily wonder where and how to discern the specific shape that a way of life abundant might take in a given time and place. What moves do people make as they encounter one another in the context of God’s grace? (Dykstra and Bass, 2002, p. 15)

Such particular wisdom is known as *phronesis* which is ‘good judgment someone shows in the face of everyday dilemmas’ (Bass et al, 2016, p. 4) and is based on Aristotle’s understanding of wisdom as ‘accruing over time through experience in the world and is exemplified by good deliberation’ (Ibid, p.5). The connection between Practical Theology and *phronesis* is recognised by Edward Farley (1983) and Don Browning (1996). Farley highlights the origins of theology as wisdom: ‘From the beginning, the Christian community has laid claim to a knowledge of God, to a divine illumination of the human intellect operative in the salvation of the human being’ (1983, p. 35) but that practical wisdom as theology was lost through the turn to post-enlightenment systematic theology (Ibid, p. 38-42). Likewise, Browning (1996) argues that religious communities:

... can and often do constitute powerful embodiments of practical rationality ... It is not that they exercise practical wisdom in spite of their religious symbols and convictions; they exercise practical wisdom *because*³ of their religious symbols and convictions (p. 10).

For Browning, the lived experience of churches offers an opportunity for tradition and wisdom to interrelate as Practical Theology (Browning, 1996, p. 34-36). Drawing on this rich tradition, Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2016), and Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra (2002) argue for a Practical Theology today in the pursuit of the recovery of wisdom as practical know-how, and in particular through embodied Christian practical wisdom.

³ Emphasis author’s own.

This project contributes a reflective view of discernment practice for locally held knowledge that is second nature to Baptists. Participants identified an unstructured discernment process; no written guide articulates a Baptist approach to discerning the mind of Christ. A practical theological approach values local practical wisdom and seeks to recover and celebrate theological know-how. Only through talking to church members and ministers about their experience of discernment has it been possible to articulate this practice. This research identifies the need to share slow wisdom with new members and offers this written record of Baptist discernment as a contribution to the denomination.

Comparing Baptist slow wisdom and Brueggemann's slow wisdom

In Walter Brueggemann's lecture at the Baylor Symposium of Faith and Culture (2011), Brueggemann argues that the university should be a mediating presence by teaching slow wisdom. He uses the poetry of Jeremiah to typify two triads at work in the world, one of control seen in might, wisdom and wealth and the second of fidelity seen in steadfast love, justice and righteousness of God. He describes his slow wisdom as marked by 'body, neighbourhood, tradition, pain, dreams, vocation, imagination and Torah (2011). He calls for a renewed 'relational integrity appearing as love ... relationships in neighbourhoods that make for the common good' (2011) as necessary for societal change and as part of the justice of God. Brueggemann's slow wisdom offers a strategic redirection to the university and society, towards teaching and practising slow wisdom in love, justice and the righteousness of God based on Jeremiah. However, Baptist slow wisdom is contextual and specific to Baptist discernment at the Church Meeting. It is not identified by participants as biblical but a wisdom that is learnt through membership in a Baptist community.

Overview of thesis

This first chapter has introduced the key concepts of Baptist discernment and the discovery of slow wisdom. I offer comparisons to discernment practice in the Society of Friends as an equivalent communal method that differs on the matter of consensus agreement (Sheeran, 1983). I place the project within Practical Theology as an exploration of the concrete reality of Baptist life and practice (Ballard and Pritchard, 1996). As such I identify slow wisdom as a form of Christian practical wisdom (Bass and Dykstra, 2002).

In Chapter 2 I outline the methodology for combining qualitative research methods (observation and interviews) and Practical Theology to honour and explore the lived

experience of faith for Baptists (Swinton and Mowat, 2006). The historical evidence regarding the Baptist Church Meeting (Egner, 2008) and theological themes of the covenant (Fiddes, 2006), gathered church, the body of Christ and the priesthood of all believers (Haymes et al, 2008), are explored in Chapter 3. From tradition, therefore I argue that when a Church Meeting discerns without all members attending or members attending but not participating, it struggles to adhere to Baptist theological principles of the gathered church and the priesthood of all believers.

Slow wisdom is articulated and explored through Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 4, I demonstrate the marks of slow wisdom as time, prayer, and listening to prophetic voices. I show how slow wisdom is embodied Christian practical wisdom for Baptists using Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2013, 2016). Chapter 5 outlines the final characteristics of slow wisdom as listening, hearing, consensus agreement and small group work. An example of dialogue from the World Council of Churches (2021) is instructive to my argument as is an exploration of consensus (Mansbridge, 2003). I contrast bell hooks' engaged pedagogy to slow wisdom drawing out parallels in new and shared epistemologies (hooks, 1994), listening, practical wisdom and recasting the Church Meeting as 'a site of possibility' (hooks, 2010).

This project argues that when slow wisdom is not used existing church members struggle to participate if they are younger members, members from other denominations and Black and Brown church members. I suggest these groups can feel excluded from the practice of discernment from some sample churches. In Chapter 6, I offer a review of young people's church attendance in the UK (Brierley, 2017, Perrin, 2016 and Gill, 2002) and provide an example of best practice from a sample church to increase younger members' participation by changing the format of the Church Meeting. Phil Davignon's (2016) denominational switching analysis is used as a tool to understand the changing patterns of church attendance and to explore why people from a variety of church backgrounds are now members of Baptist congregations. For this group in particular, I argue that sharing the knowledge of slow wisdom will increase participation and attendance at the Church Meeting.

However, the finding that Black and Brown members' contributions can be excluded from discernment at the Church Meeting presented a complex issue that warranted in-depth analysis which I provide in Chapter 7. Here using the contrasting environment of education, Willie Jennings' argument on the effect of Whiteness on the 'design and affection' (2020) of the

institution provides critical questions for Baptists to consider. I demonstrate that small group discussions held within the Church Meeting are more likely to enable multi-voiced participation and Black and Brown members' participation. Having articulated slow wisdom as a discernment model for Baptists, I propose that Baptists should celebrate this way of discerning the mind of Christ and share it widely with new members to be inclusive. I propose that the Church Meeting needs to change to increase the participation of younger members, members from other denominations and Black and Brown members to discern the mind of Christ as a Baptist church with Baptist theological principles.

The final chapter concludes that slow wisdom offers a fresh expression of discernment practice for Baptists, and I show the impact of sharing slow wisdom for excluded members. I outline further opportunities for qualitative research and Practical Theology analysis among Baptists in regional and national discernment and show how this thesis has contributed to discernment practices in other denominations through sharing slow wisdom at a recent Receptive Ecumenism symposium.

2. Qualitative research and Practical Theology: A Baptist approach

To explore how Baptists discern the mind of Christ at the Church Meeting, I generated a qualitative research project that sought input from the experience and theology of Baptists. I argue that exploring practice and belief is a shared meaning-making process, and as such this research operates within an interpretivist paradigm whereby ‘social reality is regarded as a product of its inhabitants’ (Blaikie, 2009, p. 99). Practical Theology and qualitative research are used as tools to offer a critical correlation between experience, theology and other sources of knowledge (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p. 95). The combination of qualitative analysis of observation and interviews and theological overview of Baptist theology relating to the Church Meeting enabled me to identify and articulate a model of discernment and connect the lived experience of faith to Baptist theological principles.

This chapter presents a methodology for the project covering reflexivity as a researcher, qualitative methods of observation, interviews and sampling, ethical considerations of care, anonymity, relationality as a researcher, fieldwork methods review of advertising, participant recruitment, recording and transcribing and a review of the coding methods chosen; thematic and axial.

A Baptist approach to qualitative research

As a Practical Theology project, this research seeks to honour and articulate the specific experience of Baptists in discernment at the Church Meeting as a rich resource to understand local praxis and locate areas for its potential reformation. The use of Practical Theology was chosen because it ‘seeks to explore the complex dynamics of particular situations to enable the development of a transformative and illuminating understanding of what is going on within these situations’ (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p. 5). By beginning with experience, I prioritise experience as a data source for theological reflection over and above ‘traditional kinds of abstract theology’ (Ballard, 2000, p. 65). In my approach, I recognised my power as a minister within BUGB as a practitioner-researcher. A practitioner-researcher conducts ‘research concerned with issues and problems that arise in professional practice. It is conducted by practitioners and aims to bring about change in the practice arena’ (Gillman and Swain, 2006, p. 234). To mitigate the power I hold as a local minister, I sought to operate as a dialogic facilitator ‘to reduce the researcher’s authorial influence on the products of the research by allowing a variety of voices to be expressed’ (Blaikie, 2010, p. 52) which enables a reflective

dialogue (Levy, 2004). In part, this is to moderate my interpretation of participants' experiences of discernment and allow the data to speak for itself (Labanow, 2006, p. 149-150) but also to directly reflect my overall theological position as a Baptist minister.

As a Baptist I believe that the local church can and should discern the mind of Christ as part of the priesthood of all believers, therefore I prioritise multi-voiced experience in methodology. In my research design, I chose qualitative research methods of participant observation of four churches and interviews of two members and the minister from each church to explore how Baptists discern together. Through coding analysis of transcripts, I identified positive discernment practices and problems faced by the Church Meeting. The process of conducting qualitative research highlighted the local nature of the Baptist Church which became acutely apparent at different stages of the research journey – developing a researcher position, sampling choices and anonymisation of participant churches. The resulting research design is distinctly Baptist and reflects a Baptist concern for participation as part of the theological belief in the priesthood of all believers.

Research design shaped by a 'community of practice'

Reflexivity as a habit of 'reflection, critical examination and analytical exploration of the research process' (Fonow and Cook, 1991, p. 2) within the professional doctorate in Practical Theology cohort at the University of Chester has critically shaped my development as a practitioner-researcher. As a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 2011), the DProf group shared a concern for Practical Theology and qualitative research and so 'learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' in a circle of apprentices where the more experienced aid the novice (Wenger, 2011, p. 2-4). The nurture of reflexivity within the community of practice is 'essential and not a matter of choice' (Blaikie, 2010, p. 51) and became apparent through the presentation of work in progress at residential. The opportunity to receive questions and critical reflection from other members of the community determined the scope of the interviews. The DProf programme pivots on a practitioner-researcher's ability to conduct research reflexively for which a research log is a significant help (Smith, 2009, p. 64). From my research log, I noted a key question from another student while waiting for dinner to be served at our training venue; Gladstone's library,

October 2016, Residential reflection

Talking to stage two students after a seminar session, I said I was going to interview a handful of ministers about their experience of discerning the mind of Christ in church meetings. I thought the overview might be important.

One student asked: Had I considered asking lay members of the church what they thought, as a more Baptist/Congregationalist approach? I realised the error of my plan! How could a Baptist research project about collective decision-making only include ministers?!

The student's question shows a 'practice of mutual critique as well as strategies for moving beyond the descriptive to engage with theoretical/conceptual frameworks which may question existing knowledge and practice' (Bennett et al, 2018, p. 90). Subsequently, I changed the design to include more members than ministers for interviews. This shift in research design better reflects my theological approach as a Baptist practitioner-researcher and Baptist ecclesiology which celebrates multi-voiced participation in discernment as a congregational church. Stuart Murray Williams and Sian Murray Williams (2012) argue both for the beauty and necessity of a multi-voiced church as a Baptist principle, therefore with the benefit of the DProf community, this principle is woven into my research design. This is a clear benefit of the cohort operating as a 'community of practitioners who value collaborative, reflexive and context-rich research, researchers have a strong investment not only in a successful outcome for their own doctoral research but that of others' (Bennett et al, 2018, p. 95). The DProf community of practice fosters a critical reflexive approach to research which enabled the modification and improvement of this project's research design.

Mixed methods: Observation and interviews

The qualitative tools of participant observation and interviewing were chosen to reflect the nuanced and constructed meanings generated by interviewees related to discernment as a social phenomenon (Mason, 2002, p. 64-175). These research methods locate data from ordinary church members at observation (Stringer, 1999) while semi-structured interviews offer an iterative approach that explores 'what the interviewee views as important in explaining and understanding events, patterns, and forms of behaviour' (Bryman, 2016, p. 468). Combining observation and interviews can enable deeper reflection on a research question (Jackson, 2009).

Two significant studies relating to the Baptist church informed my research design produced by Martin Stringer and Darrell Jackson. In 1999, Stringer examined worship practices in four different denominations around Manchester which included a Baptist church. Stringer used participant observation to gather data following his preference for 'an anthropological approach in long-term research ... the only way to understand what and why ordinary members think about worship was an ethnographic methodology' (1999, p. 15). This shift from participant observation in Stringer's anthropological approach towards ethnography is

argued by Alan Bryman to recognise that ‘participant observation seems to imply just observation, though in practice observers do more than just observe’ (Bryman, 2016, p. 423). Ethnography recognises the role of the researcher in observation:

Ethnographers immerse themselves within the community they seek to understand in order to observe systematically and record actions and interactions, routines and rituals, and dialogue and exchange amongst the members or inhabitants (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls and Ormston, 2014, p. 249).

As a local minister I am already immersed in the Baptist community and acknowledge my access to Church Meetings was gained due to the collegiality of ministers in the region. My existing knowledge of the Baptist church enabled a deeper investigation into discernment which mitigated my lack of time to conduct long-term participant observation as preferred by Stringer (1999). Instead, I chose to use a thorough observation of practice and participant interviews as a ‘useful alternative to participant observation’ (Blaikie, 2009, p. 207) as a partially participating observer where ‘interviews can be more significant than observation’ (Bryman, 2016, p. 436).

As a dialogic facilitator, I hoped to illuminate a ‘polyphony’ (Fontana, 1994, p. 214) of lived experiences of discernment and create a ‘collegial enterprise’ (Pryce, 2019, p. 93). At the interview stage, I wanted participants to share their constructed view of the Church Meeting, to be able to compare different experiences and locate ‘consensus and divergence on specific issues’ (Levy, 2004, p. 59) through coding within the sample group. For comparison to my approach, I noted Jackson’s (2009) mixed method qualitative and quantitative research project on Baptist church membership. Jackson states that Baptist theologians have prioritised historical and constitutional discourses over exploring the views of local church members (2009, p. 13). By using statistical analysis of membership data collated by BUGB, Jackson tests an internal Baptist Union report regarding attendance and membership in Baptist churches and reflects on Baptist Union ‘Membership Roundtable’ discussions⁴. The use of interviews in qualitative research on the Baptist Church Meeting enables this project to offer a new contribution to theological knowledge on discernment. In Jackson’s work, I saw that

⁴ ‘The report showed that between 1989 and 1998 regular attendance had increased from an estimated 162,000 to 167,500. Over the same period, church membership decreased from 161,400 to 144,900’ (Jackson, 1999, p. 8).

generating interview questions from field notes and the experience of observation (2009, pp. 126-143) created a shared experience to discuss and would be a suitable approach for this project as well. Therefore, I used each observed Church Meeting as the basis for the first interview questions. Moreover, this method was chosen so that ‘people will be prepared to respond in depth (Fielding, 1986, p. 50) and to engage ‘people’s capacity to verbalise, interact, conceptualise and remember’ (Mason, 2002, p. 64).

Uncovering cross-contextual generalities: use of stratified sampling

I chose four local Baptist churches as a stratified sample to generate data for the project. Using stratified sampling offered project-specific and sufficiently generalised data to be both contextual and broadly relevant to investigate discernment practice (Silverman, 2010). The method was selected to make ‘cross-contextual generalities ... based on sensitive and rich, specific contexts’ (Mason, 2002, p. 125) and to offer a ‘strategic sample relevant to the research question’ (Bryman, 2016, p. 418). Particularly as each church is autonomous, using a range of Baptist churches gives the project broader relevance to the denomination. John Dudovskiy (2020) states:

Stratified sampling is a probability sampling method and a form of random sampling in which the population is divided into two or more groups (strata) according to one or more common attributes. These attributes can be sex, age, income, level of education etc. according to the aims and objectives of the study (p. 1).

The population was determined to have the common attributes of being a Baptist church in the London Baptist Association and part of my local district. This choice was determined by the objective of the project which is to reflect on Baptist church practice. Another common attribute of the population sample was that all churches were members of the London Baptist Association and Baptist Union, therefore all churches affiliated with the Union through the declaration of principle which provides a shared basis of ecclesiology. I needed to be able to easily travel for observations and interviews to be able to complete the research in the given timeframe. For each of these reasons, participants' churches were also chosen from the London Baptist Association district structure which limits this thesis to a particular context.

Having determined the population for the sample, I created strata within the sample with the variable of the size of a church. Jan Trost (1986) states that the benefits of variables in a sample ensure a broader analysis of a population instead of using snowball or constant comparison techniques (1986, p. 55). Dudovskiy (2020) highlights one particular issue of sampling in this way as requiring ‘knowledge of strata membership a priori. The requirement to be able to easily

distinguish between strata in the sample frame may create difficulties in practical levels' (p. 1). However, strata were identifiable and promptly distinguishable by using a regional contact directory.

There are 292 London Baptist Association churches⁵ which are divided into 11 districts across the London area. In my local district, there are 31 churches which I divided into strata by membership size according to the most recent association directory 2013,⁶ however only 18 churches provided the number of members. Steven Thompson (2012) states that 'the principle of stratification is to partition the population in such a way that the unit within a stratum is as similar as possible to be representative of the population as whole' (p. 141). Therefore, I divided these 18 churches into strata by ranking the number of members as follows:

<i>Strata</i>	<i>Number of members</i>	<i>Number of churches</i>
1	25-35	5
2	35-45	5
3	45-67	5
4	100 +	3

The division of the churches provided a discernment practice to analyse from a small, medium, large and extra-large church. The strata division reflects the general size of the 2000 BUGB churches where the Small Connexion group states that 'approximately 1000 churches have under 40 people' (2022).⁷ The identification of each stratum provided a rationale for four participant churches, which were then approached in alphabetical order. Access to the sample churches was given by approaching the minister of the church by telephone. Only one of the smallest churches chose not to take part. Having the minister's support was vital to facilitate members' participation (King and Horrocks, 2010, p. 32). The four participant churches are a stratified sample of Baptist churches that share denominational affiliation, and similar geographical locations, but vary according to size. The sample set was chosen to share generalities and provided variation (Trost, 1986) suitable for this qualitative project question.

Flexible interviewing method

⁵ List of Baptist Union churches of the London Baptist Association available at <https://www.londonbaptist.org.uk/about-us> [Accessed: 20/2/23]

⁶ There is difficulty in gaining access to data regarding Baptist churches while paper-based systems are being transferred to an online database. I have used the most readily available data to me.

⁷ Data accessed from Baptist Union Small Church Connexion at https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/334836/Small_Church_Connexion.aspx. [Accessed: 1/2/2023]

After observation, semi-structured interviews provided the core data for coding analysis. Two self-selecting participants for interview were gathered from those members present at the observed Church Meeting on a first come first served basis. I conducted twelve interviews between 12 March 2018 and 8 November 2018, with six male and six female participants. Interviews were held within two to four weeks of the final observed Church Meeting in participants' homes or churches as participants chose the most comfortable venue for themselves (Oliver, 2010, p. 106). I learnt from the first interview that 'flexibility is a key requirement of qualitative interviewing' (King and Horrocks, 2010, p. 35) as a benefit of semi-structured interviews is gleaning any free association of ideas by participants (Hollway and Jefferson, 2008, p. 309), which would be useful to make connections across themes. The first two questions were tailored to discuss discernment in the observed Church Meeting. I generated a list of conversation topics related to discernment from reading pre-existing denominational provided by Haymes et al (2008), Holmes (2012) and congregational studies literature from Matthew Guest, Karen Tusting and Linda Woodhead (2004). In the individual and church participant information sheet, I provided the interview 'guide' to indicate topic areas in discernment: decision-making, prayer and revelation, influence of powerful members, silence and non-participation of members and Baptist identity (King and Horrocks, 2010, p. 35) see Appendix 1 and 3.

Ethical considerations: caring for participants, anonymity, power and identity of the researcher

Foremost in my mind, as a minister is to care for those I encounter. As an accredited Baptist minister, I am trained and experienced in pastoral care by which my 'person-centred skills help develop good research relationships and maintain engagement' (Hewitt, 2007, p. 1153) throughout the project. Therefore, I was glad to consider the ethical implications for research within the university ethics procedure which I found 'useful in providing an opportunity to think through systematically ethical dimensions of the research process in compliance with the University code for research' (Pryce, 2019, p. 77). As such I considered the care of participants at interview, the anonymisation of individuals and churches and my role as another minister and as a practitioner-researcher.

Caring for participants

From each sample church, two members and the minister who had attended the observed Church Meeting consented to be interviewed. Participants were self-selecting and reminded of 'process consent' (Silverman, 2010, p. 159). As a practitioner-researcher, I was acutely aware

that even a seemingly mundane question could be disturbing to an individual (Blaikie, 2009, p. 31). Therefore, I recommended a follow-up meeting with the member's minister or another local minister as appropriate to address any further pastoral concerns. After each interview, I emailed individual participants with a transcription of their interview as recommended by the British Sociological Association (2002, p. 24). Each participant confirmed that they were content with the accuracy of transcription and still wished to participate in the project (Ward, 2004, ch.9).

While I did not encounter 'the pastoral, hierarchical nature of ecclesial working relationships' (Pryce 2019, p.16) as Mark Pryce did within the Church of England, other ministers in particular, did express a sense of being reported as an initial expression during observation. In part, this reflects, again, the local nature of the Baptist church that presents in the tendency towards independence of individual churches and a lack of awareness of other churches' practices. I also recognise and acknowledge the problem of power within research relationships but suggest that the 'key to the function of power within knowledge construction is the methodological and epistemological perspective of the researcher' (Smyth and Williamson, 2004, p. 6). As mentioned above the methodological approach of a dialogic facilitator is to showcase a broad range of contributors, so I have created a thesis that brings multiple voices to lead in data-led conclusions to redress the power imbalance between researcher and participants. I reciprocated vulnerability by sharing my own positive and negative experiences of Church Meetings at interviews to ensure a positive 'atmosphere of equality between researcher and respondent' (Oliver, 2010, p. 110) exists. I acknowledge that as a practitioner-researcher I cannot be neutral (Mason, 2002), but I benefitted from my cultural familiarity (Das, 2010) in the use of shared terminology and tacit knowledge of discernment practice as a Baptist minister for 'meaning-making and metaphor' (McCutcheon, 1999, p. 9). In addition, the documentation provided to participant churches and individuals from the University of Chester assuaged the potential concerns of participants and confirmed that I would use their data sensitively to generate best practices over and above the critique of any individuals (See Appendix 1-4).

Anonymity

Anonymity is given to interviewees and sample churches as an 'underlying principle of respect' for participants (King and Horrocks, 2010, p. 117)⁸. Anonymised individual

⁸ See also the British Sociological Association's *Statement of Ethical Practice* (2002).

contributions still provide a thick description of social context with the use of pseudonyms which 'preserve the identity' of participants (Bryman, 2016, p. 446). However, the provision of anonymity for churches underlined the local and contextual ecclesiology of Baptist churches. Informed consent included 'adequate information' regarding the project and in particular how anonymity would be maintained in the data (Webster, Lewis, Brown, 2014, p. 87-88). Therefore, to preserve the anonymity of project volunteers I elected not to use the participants' real names. I asked each person to choose a pseudonym but they either offered their own names or asked me to choose. I resolved to identify participants 'obliquely by using a pseudonym' (Doherty, 2021, p. 480) for each person that reflected the tone and era of their original name such as Alan for Brian. Although this shows my power as a researcher, I felt this honoured the requests of participants and maintained all participants' anonymity. Personalised data was kept separately and not beyond the length of the study period as suggested by Bryman (2016, p. 128). I reflected that the use of a name assists in the generation of a thick description of the person and their perspective, which Clifford Geertz establishes, is the basis of ethnography (1973, p. 3-7). By using Gilbert Ryle's original terms from 1971 'thick' and 'thin' (trans. 2009, p. 491), Geertz argues that physical and observable events offer a thin description of a situation, whereas a thick description of culture 'conveys a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures' (1973, p. 7). Choosing a pseudonym in this manner helps the project to be meaningful as Geertz suggests by 'preserving the traits of social life in a culture' (Daymon and Holloway, 2010, p. 152). Furthermore, as Cory Labanow (2006) argues it reduces the risk detailed below of coding transcripts and offers the reader the opportunity to assess project data afresh. Within this project, anonymity is retained while offering a nuanced portrait of Baptists' perception of discernment.

However, referring anonymously to participant churches was difficult as almost every Baptist church is named after its location; Poynton Baptist is the Baptist church in Poynton, Cheshire. I had never considered the Baptist practice of naming churches by location. It stands in contrast to other churches, for example, St George's church in Poynton is part of the Church of England. However, failing to recognise the need to anonymise participant churches highlighted my insider position as a minister in BUGB. Bruce Moore (2007) argues that conducting insider research presents challenges for while 'I had no difficulty in recognising the processes of social construction in operation in unfamiliar settings, I was seemingly ignorant and inhibited from knowing the forces acting upon me' (p. 30). Pete Ward (2012) suggests that

insider research is a critical role for theologians considering unexamined beliefs and practices as ‘this dynamic takes on a unique and important function when congregational research is done ... namely that God is a recognised actor in the analytical process’ (p. 106). The unexamined process of naming a church by its location underlined for me the Baptist value in the local church as the body of Christ. For Baptists, God is understood as present in a local context when the local church gathers for worship. As Holmes (2012) states: ‘There is no Baptist church that is not a local congregation; associations, conventions and unions are just that – associations, conventions and unions of local churches’ (p. 97). Moreover, the Baptist focus on the local church also reflects the intrinsic ethnographic shift in Practical Theology in the UK (Ward, 2012, p. 102 and Guest, 2004, p. 6) that is sensitive to understanding the local contemporary congregation over and above an extrinsic concern for the general health of the church (Hopewell, 1987, p. 3).

Nonetheless, I still needed a way to refer to sample churches. It was the centenary of the ordination of women in the Baptist Church in 2019 when the observation stage of research was completed. As a female minister, it felt like a fitting tribute to these women to use their names (none of which have been taken by Baptist Churches) to refer to participant churches. I named the church in strata 1 after Violet Hedger who was the first woman to be trained for ministry at Regent’s Park College Oxford in 1919. Margaret Jarman was the first female BUGB President in 1987 and provided the name for the strata 2 church. The church from strata 3 is named after Edith Gates who had a ministry in 1918 at Little Tew and Cleveley in Oxfordshire. Finally, Kate Coleman was the first Black woman to become an accredited Baptist minister in 1996 and latterly the first Black woman to be BUGB President in 2006⁹ is the name I chose to refer to the sample church from strata 4. Gates, Hedger, Jarman and Coleman, therefore, are the references for the four churches that participated in this project.

Relationality as a practitioner-researcher

Early in the interview stage of the project, I met Desmond the first Black minister of Hedger Baptist Church who opened the question of relationality and research for me. He recounted a conversation he had with the previous treasurer at his church as follows:

Desmond: He was concerned that the church was becoming too Black.

Ruth: Was he White?

⁹ Dates provided by Baptist Union through Project Violet available at https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/363283/What_is_Project.aspx. [Accessed: 1/3/2019]

Desmond: Yeah.

Hearing Desmond's experience of racism was a poignant moment in fieldwork for me. As a researcher informed by sixteen years of ministerial practice, I had expected to observe and discover plenty of stories around power, silencing of women and low attendance at Church Meetings in comparison to Sunday worship services. Such expectations were formed by the experience of attending four different Baptist churches as a White female middle-class member or as a minister. Indeed, in preparation for observation, I had noted Frances Ward's exploration of silence and women in congregational research and presumed I would encounter the same (2004, pp. 129-134). However, these expectations were challenged by listening to Desmond's early experience as a Black minister in an historically White Baptist church.

On reflection, I realised that Desmond's story required a new kind of listening, in which it would be important to acknowledge my position and biases. I explore my privilege of Whiteness as a minister and researcher in Chapter 7. Both Desmond and I shared a commonality: being a Baptist minister in London. Vron Ware and Les Back (2002) argue relationality between the participant and the researcher helps to 'avoid the construction of simplified and hermetic distinctions between empirical objects of research and the recondite position of the ethnographer' (p. 40). Our shared relationality as ministers meant that I was able to offer a 'cousin' position as a researcher whereby both interviewer and interviewee speak the same language, understand nuances and recognise family problems (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, Pesach, 2009). As a White woman, I could not appreciate Desmond's pain of experiencing racism, but I felt grateful to all those participating in the project who graciously shared their stories of exclusion.

Fieldwork review: refining participant advertising and recruitment

Gates Baptist Church provided the first observation of a Church Meeting for this project. While the observation session proved to be fruitful in terms of data generation, my lack of preparedness as a researcher showed what Frances Ward names as the 'messiness' of ethnographic study of churches (2004, ch.9). The experience of observing at Gates uncovered initial problems with my research design (Arthur, Mitchell, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, 2014, p. 173) which showed two areas of the planned fieldwork to refine: the presentation of a project on the field and the process of recruitment of volunteers to participate at interview. Following my experience and reflection on the Gates observation, I reframed the information given out to the Church Meeting and asked each minister to become a 'guide' to let me

introduce myself before the meeting began (McNaughton Nicholls, Mills, Kotecha, 2014, p. 258). These refinements significantly improved the recruitment of participants for interviews.

Before the Church Meeting at Gates began, an efficient and friendly-looking woman introduced herself to me and remarked “Oh yes you’re the last item on the agenda” (Field notes, 28/1/18). I realised that I had arranged to observe this meeting at relatively short notice due to my ministry commitments and had not asked the minister how or when I wanted my presence to be introduced. The minister introduced me briefly at the start and then again at the end when the members were keen to go home, so I was only able to speak briefly about the project. I had planned to introduce the project, ask for volunteers for interviews to approach me after the meeting and provide their contact details on a simple form (see Appendix 5). On seeing the long agenda at Gates, I feared that engaging volunteers for interviews would be difficult and it was. I only found one female volunteer with this method and so reluctantly but necessarily asked for the minister to source another volunteer at a later date.

For King and Horrocks (2010), it is necessary to ‘build rapport’ when recruiting participants and they note the benefit of self-presentation of the project to communicate the identity and personal qualities of the researcher (pp. 48-49). Therefore, at consequent observations in the other sample churches, I asked for a few minutes to introduce myself and the project at the beginning of the Church Meeting. In addition, I produced a different style of leaflet to distribute at the beginning with a light-hearted cartoon image of a Church Meeting from Dave Walker (Cartoon Church, 2019) and a brief description of the project (Appendix 6). In subsequent observations, I found volunteers offered completed forms straight after the Meeting having had time to consider it throughout the Meeting. The experience of my first observation refined the research design of the project and although one interview candidate was not self-selecting in the same manner, his participation through a minister contact reflects the imperfect or messy nature of fieldwork (Ward, 2004).

Recording group meetings and resolving transcribing problems

In my original research design, I had planned to observe discernment, make use of the Meeting minutes and interview participants on discernment to triangulate data and produce an in-depth analysis of how Baptists discern (Silverman, 2010, p. 134). As soon as possible after the first observation at Gates Baptist, I tried to transcribe the Meeting. I used a Dictaphone and backup

audio computer function to record the Church Meeting. Both methods produced an audio recording of the Meeting, but I found it virtually impossible to transcribe. The chair had used a microphone, so I could hear his words clearly, but as soon as a general discussion broke out, I could not identify which voice was speaking, if they spoke again, or catch snippets of overlapping interjections. Rather than modifying the research design entirely, I recognised the benefit of observation as excellent at building rapport with potential participants for interviews and it helped me to see different ways in which Meetings were organised; in terms of seating layout, general participation and type of agenda items. Observation also provided a shared experience to begin each interview, I shaped early questions around the observed Church Meeting. Similar to Jackson's (2009) experience of interviewing Baptist church members regarding membership, observation then gave a specific experience of discernment to discuss which generated rich interviews for analysis.

Thematic and Axial Coding

The reality of facing the interview transcripts of 101,347 words caused me to reconsider my chosen coding methodology. The first cycle of generating concept codes and categories was laborious but sufficiently summarised the data. A secondary coding cycle of axial coding however exposed anomalies in this process which was resolved by including In Vivo (Saldana, 2016, p. 105) titles for concept codes and a thick description within the text. This revised method was designed to answer the research question as fully as possible. In my research proposal, I selected a two-part analysis using qualitative methods to identify concept codes in the data as Jonny Saldana argues it offers the researcher the opportunity to 'develop a new theory about a phenomenon' (2016, p. 71). As Petria Theron (2015) states the process of identifying concepts from the transcripts and then categories to summarize the content of the interviews felt like a systematic approach suitable for Practical Theology (p. 1). I chose to use short phrases used by participants - In Vivo titles - for concept codes, as I felt this balanced my interpretation of the data over the participants' contributions. Likewise, Saldana suggests that 'In Vivo coding is ... particularly appropriate for studies that prioritize and honour the participant's voice' (2016, p. 106). Alongside this first stage of coding, analytical memos were used to record potential connections between concepts. Coding in this manner was an 'interpretative activity that linked data to ideas' (Theron, 2015, p. 4).

However, my early attempts to conduct a second cycle of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), gave mixed results. Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin offer axial coding to 'produce

categories that perform two functions: they have to express what the theory is about, and they have to express how they relate to each other' (Gibson and Hartman, 2014, p. 98). Taking a core concept of finance, personnel and conflict as a starting point, I gathered all the concept codes about the matter and began to ask questions about the data. This seemed to be a natural stage to ask of the data, I asked what are the 'properties of and dimensions ... of a category such as the contexts, conditions, interactions and consequences' (Saldana, 2016, p. 244).

Axial coding enabled the construction of a consequential argument from the experience of members where historic conflict occurred, inertia or low attendance followed as shown in the table below:

In Vivo	Condition:	Context:	Action:	Consequence:
When half the people walked out	Historic event	Personnel and finance matter	Conflict	Inertia
Not as much participation as I would like	Historic event	Personnel and finance matter	Low attendance	Inertia
Somebody got up and complained about the youth worker	Historic event	Personnel issue	Conflict	Low attendance
I've stopped asking	Historic conflict	Financial questions	Finance removed	Inertia

When I attempted to apply axial coding to the concept of conflict and the category of behaviour, it was more testing. In particular, it was difficult to analyse the consequences of a code where participants only briefly mentioned conflict and behaviour and yet seemed 'to be a random association of ideas about prayer, mood, confrontation, agenda' (Research log, February 2019). I resolved that I could not determine any logic to this code. This led me to consider how participants express themselves in interviews and how I heard them. Some participants were able to succinctly state a problem, a reaction to that problem and the consequence for the individuals and the wider church. The participants I struggled to code were those who were speaking in a second language or ageing people with limited memory. It was uncomfortable for me to make connections and identify the consequences of a code where participants were only speaking loosely about a topic. It felt that the method was pushing participants into saying more than they had.

Here the reality of attempting axial coding analysis made the theoretical divide around axial coding come alive. Kathy Charmaz (2014) argues axial coding is an unhelpful method as

strategies ought to be 'emergent from data' (p. 148) and not be applied to data. In particular, she finds axial coding to be inappropriate as it either extends or limits coding (2006, p. 61). Charmaz's concerns echoed my own when faced with asking questions about data that either resulted in creating connections for a participant or leaving a blank box in my coding table. As authors of axial coding, Strauss and Corbin's position shifts across their literature on the role of axial coding. They acknowledge that by offering a separate chapter on axial coding in their 1990 work, a false distinction between open and axial coding was drawn but that coding is one process (2008, p. 198). Corbin and Strauss (2008) highlight that the role of the analyst is to 'work with data in their minds and automatically make connections because, after all, the connections come from the data' (p. 198). They also argue that the role of analytical memos is critical as they link concepts and 'check hunches against data' (Strauss and Corbin, 2008, p. 199).

Axial coding does identify patterns within data, but it also highlights anomalies. Nonetheless, it provides a visible framework for the generation of the argument of this project. To mitigate the risks identified by Strauss and Corbin themselves and the critique of Charmaz, the research design was refined using Cory Labanow's method of researching the local church (Labanow, 2006). He suggests providing the reader with a thick description of the data and a rationale for decisions made about coding methods to minimise coding concerns (p. 149-50). Where the method of axial coding generates a difficulty, I show and explore at greater depth the variety of data concerning a code and allow for a thick description to express anomalies where possible. The process of axial coding is to ask questions of the data, it is designed to be flexible and an iterative process, therefore I show where a matter is unresolved as a limitation of the project and an opportunity for further research (White, Woodfield, Ritchie and Ormston, 2014, p. 378). Where questions of data lack an answer from a participant, I show this discrepancy within the text as a normal part of life where we see in part and know in part, and preserve the meaning offered by the participant.

Each part of the research design and refinements made in fieldwork observation and interview provide data for the project in identifying and articulating the practice of discernment for Baptists. My research approach has enabled a fresh outlook on the connection between belief and the lived experience of faith for Baptists. It expands Baptist knowledge surrounding discernment and should lead to a renewal of practice. Through observing four churches of varying sizes, the project can make generalisations regarding how Baptists believe the mind of

Christ is discerned at the Church Meeting. The prioritisation of members' participation in interviews shapes the data as a direct reflection of the ecclesiology of congregational church models and provides a Baptist model of qualitative research. Summative themes from coding provide the data to argue that Baptist discernment is a form of Christian practical wisdom and anomalies uncovered through axial coding provide critical reflection on those excluded from slow wisdom.

3. *'This body life': A history of Baptist discernment*

I met Nell, the church secretary at Hedger Baptist, in her comfortable 1930s home in a leafy cul-de-sac. She offered me coffee in a pottery mug from a holiday trip to Wales and buttery shortbread biscuits. As a White female retired teacher, she spoke passionately about children in the church, her concern for the developing world and a scriptural and theological position for the poor. Toyin also attends Hedger, she described Nell to me:

She collects for Christian Aid, she drives the anniversary, she drives the ... children's church which is marvellous. She has made an immense contribution to that church. She retired early and she is just devoted. She is always helping with the children with her personal time as well, with learning English.

However, Nell was frustrated at the lack of attendance of members at Church Meetings at Hedger Baptist Church and identified a key problem:

A lot don't come from a Baptist tradition, so they don't see that the Church Meeting is important ... but it's this body life which is supposed to be the Baptist thing which is foreign really.

Nell's phrase 'This body life' succinctly summarises several principles evident in Baptist thought and practice. Based on the Declaration of Principle (1873) Baptists discern the mind of Christ as a gathered church in a particular place. To my mind, 'this' references the immediate and localised nature of Baptist congregational life. 'Body' evokes the New Testament image of the church as a body (1 Corinthians 12.4-27) and 'life' recognises the vitality of Baptist church life, walking, sharing and discerning together as a church in covenant. The problem that Nell confronts is that these principles are unknown and undervalued by new members which in part results in low attendance at the Church Meeting.

On questioning Nell further about the impact of members joining from different churches, I asked:

Ruth: If there was a move of people who weren't Baptists within the church who said, "Let's get rid of the Church Meeting", do you think the diehard Baptists might say you can't?

Nell: I wouldn't want to get rid of the Church Meeting. Any more than you would say 'Well let's get rid of worship'. It's the nature of what the church is, in our understanding of the New Testament of what the church is - the body of the church and he is the head. So, he's the head of the church but under him and the whole business of the priesthood of all believers is a Baptist principle, isn't it?

This chapter explores how the theological principle and practice of a Baptist Church Meeting began in the Baptist church, the use of the biblical image of the church as a body and the priesthood of all believers and how Nell's terminology 'this body life' is reflected in the current practice of the Church Meeting.

History of the Baptist Church

The story of the emergence of the Baptist church provides a theological principle and historical precedent for a gathered church that discerns the mind of Christ together. The priesthood of all believers is a Baptist theological belief where all Christians are deemed able to have the liberty to gather and discern God's will in scripture and by meeting together. Historically the Baptist church was persecuted for this radical departure from the state church – the Church of England. It is this combination of dissenting theology and historical formation that makes discernment in the Church Meeting critical to Baptist identity and practice. This project identifies some participants whose beliefs cohere with the historical and theological roots of the early Baptists but also shows through observation at Church Meetings that some churches draw heavily on democratic models instead.

The beginnings of the Baptist Church are found in the 'ferment of the Reformation' led by Martin Luther in 1517 (George, 1989, p. 9)¹⁰ and dissent led by Puritans and then Separatists who 'boldly decided to leave the Church of England to set up model churches of the Reformation, to which models they hoped the Church of England would in time conform' (Lumpkin, 1959, p. 14). Stanley Grenz (2002) states that the first general¹¹ Baptist congregation is noted to have begun 'in 1608, as a Separatist congregation led by John Smyth [who] left Gainsborough, England and resettled in Amsterdam' (p. 77). John Smyth was ordained as a priest in the Church of England and was a fellow and lecturer at Cambridge. He raised objections around church practice within the Church of England and was removed from office in 1602. By 1606 he was charged for preaching without a licence by the Archdeacon's court at Gainsborough. Lumpkin (1959) summarises that Smyth and other like-minded Puritans 'in the

¹⁰ Payne (1944) notes that while Baptists are from the Reformation era, they 'do not come from one Reformation stream exclusively' (p. 14).

¹¹ The emergence of the Baptist church movement is seen in both General and Particular forms of Baptist churches, see Roger Hayden (2005). There are conflicting theories regarding the level of Anabaptist influence on Baptists, Payne (1944) writes: 'Some Anabaptist influence, direct and indirect, almost certainly went to the making of the earliest Baptist communities in this country and there is every reason to be proud of it' (p. 15). See Wright (1991), Murray Williams (2012). For additional Mennonite influence, see Payne (1944).

light of this persecution ... decided to terminate all relationship with the Established Church and organise separatist churches of their own' (p. 97).

Another key member of this early Baptist church forced to flee to religious toleration in Amsterdam was Thomas Helwys who on his return 'founded the first general Baptist church on English soil' (Fiddes, 2006, p. 21). In 1612, Helwys wrote and published *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* stating the first written case for religious liberty. His note in the copy sent to King James I said: 'The King is a mortal man and not God: therefore, hath no power over immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual Lords over them' (cited Hayden 2005, p. 24 and Young, 1996, p. 21). As a result of his book, Helwys was imprisoned at Newgate and died in that same prison by 1616. Walter Shurden (1998) argues that this formative time for Baptists gave rise to the initial concern for 'the freedom to believe, worship and live according to conscience' (p. 337). The earliest and defining years of the Baptist church emerging from the Reformation were characterised by the rejection of the state and by the cause of freedom of conscience and religious liberty.

In rejection of the state church, early Baptists proposed a different model of church: a gathered and covenanted church. Gathered in the sense of Jesus speaking in Matthew 18.20 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'. Gathering according to a shared understanding of faith as members of the body of Christ was 'completely foreign to the Church of England established by Queen Elizabeth' (Hayden, 2005, p. 21). Foregoing the legal requirement of church attendance for adults in England and choosing to worship and lead a Christian life in a dissenting tradition was 'to indulge in political activity near to treason' (Haymes et al, 2008, p. 54). The rationale for gathering in this manner was the promise held by the early Baptists to encounter the presence of Christ. Gathering in this way was a practical sign of the spirit of liberty sought by Baptists like Smyth and Helwys in religious freedom.

Closely aligned with the nature of a gathered church for the early Baptists was a covenanted church. Baptists take the inspiration for a covenant model of church from scripture using covenants found with the patriarchs of the Old Testament¹² and the new covenant established in Christ shared in communion. Baptists demonstrate a covenanted church through membership and participation at the Church Meeting. Fiddes (2006) argues that a covenantal

¹² See Noah (Genesis 9), Abraham (Genesis 15) and Moses (Exodus 24).

theology (and practice) was present before and in the early Baptist congregations citing William Bradford¹³; another member of the Gainsborough congregation who said that members:

Joyned them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a Church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walke in all his ways, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them (p. 21).

As a gathered and covenanted church ‘to walk in all his ways’ was of fundamental importance for an understanding of the Baptist life at its best’ (Payne, 1944, p. 17). This is a model of church authority and power that takes seriously the ability of all people to discern God’s activity and purpose in the world. Kidd (1996) describes the Baptist approach to covenant in terms of the ‘vertical’ and the ‘horizontal’. He suggests that the new covenant in Christ is seen at communion where:

The vertical initiative of God and the horizontal bonds of fellowship are both sharply in focus. The breaking of the body of Jesus and the shedding of his blood which seal the new covenant and are the basis for the making of the Body of Christ, the new community, creates a people covenanted together one with each other on the foundation of God’s initiative in sacrificial love (p. 8).

A church gathered in the name of Christ and covenanted in relationship to God and with each other was sought by early Baptists who like John Smyth wanted ‘to establish a pattern of church life in accordance with the scriptures without bishops and in a covenanted church model’ (Hayden, 2005, p. 13). Members of the early Baptist church were bound together in an interpretation of scripture that raised an alternative to state religion: freedom of religious liberty seen in the covenanted model of Baptist churches.

Today this emphasis on covenant is seen when a new member is asked to make the following promises as part of a Sunday worship service:

‘A as a member of this church
Do you promise to share your life
And your journey of faith
With these people in this place?

I do.
Together we are called
To be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Will you keep listening for the call of God,

¹³ See Ford on Bradford (1912)

Ready to serve others
And to witness to Jesus Christ
As a member of this church?

I will.
We are the body of Christ,
And the Spirit shares the gifts of grace
For service and witness.

Will you, as the members of (this church)
Promise to share your lives and journey of faith with A,
Walking together in ways that are known
And yet to be made known?
We will.

Will you pray for A
And do all you can to help A
To witness to Jesus Christ?

We will.
In our life together we celebrate
The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
The love of God
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit'
(BUGB Gathering for Worship, 2005, p. 79-80).

These promises show the beginning of the relationship between a new member, existing members and God in a Baptist church that reflects the historic theme of covenant seen in the Gainsborough text above.

Persecution forges a distinctive identity for Baptists

The Baptist emphasis on the use of and interpretation of scripture in the context of the gathered church as the priesthood of all believers brought persecution to the church. Young (1996) states:

Baptist commitment to the idea of the priesthood of all believers is the product of our commitment to Scripture. Our commitment to religious liberty, including the priesthood of all believers was forged in the crucible of persecution and suffering that Baptists experienced under a state church and hostile civil authorities (p. 19).

Persecution of pioneers such as Helwys was significant but equally at a local level, Baptist churches met considerable resistance to their early meetings in homes or other meeting places as this example recounted by Dexter Miller (1900) on the 17th history of Maze Pond Chapel; an early Baptist church:

If they (the informers) surprised the minister, he was pulled out of his pulpit by constables or soldiers, and, together with his people, carried before a justice of the peace, who obliged them to pay their fines or dragged them to prison. If the minister escaped, they ransacked the house from top to bottom, broke open chambers, entered the rooms of those who were sick, and offered all kinds of rudeness and incivilities to the family, though they met with no manner of opposition or resistance ... Dissenting ministers could neither travel the road nor appear in public but in disguise (p. 26).

Early Baptists who founded the first Baptist churches were persecuted and similar persecution was met within local church gatherings. To be committed to a Baptist way of church life was to challenge commonly held views regarding the necessity of a state church, as Malcolm Egner (2008) suggests: 'This gathered church concept would have been anathema to most people who were steeped in the parish system' (p. 9). Early Baptists promoted an interpretation of scripture upholding religious freedom and liberty as a right. With liberty as a principle, the practice of the belief in the priesthood of all believers resulted in a different approach to church life and organisation which was held to great cost by individuals and churches.

This brief overview of the context of the emerging general Baptist church in the 16th and 17th centuries and its leaders is significant in two ways: the general Baptist church was forged in a desire for liberty and an environment of persecution. The liberty sought was to worship in freedom as a gathered church. The resulting persecution that beset the early Baptists and combined forged a determination to survive. The pursuit of liberty and persecution galvanised the early Baptists and ensured that this new model of church life was distinctive in theology and defiant in existence.

History of the Church Meeting

In terms of the practice of the Church Meeting as part of Baptist church life, Haymes et al (2008) suggest the following pattern and principle:

In the early days, such church meetings were often part of what happened on Sundays, the church was gathered, offered worship, listened to scripture, heard sermons, offered prayer, and shared communion at the Lord's table. Together they would seek guidance for matters of faith and practice, discussing in this context what it was to worship, use resources, who was in need, who Christ had given as ministers. This was the church seeking the mind of the Lord so that they might be his people. Such a vision has a high view of the people of God under the leading of the lord, receiving together Spirit-guided insight into the mind of Christ as he reveals it not only to the clever and powerful but even to the simple and childlike (Matthew 11.25-30) (p. 51).

Therefore, gathering for worship and the Church Meeting placed discernment as key to early Baptist life and practice. However, in terms of meeting agenda items, Holmes (2012) states:

‘In British Baptist tradition, Church Meetings before 1800 were almost always focused on policing the Christian conduct of members’ (p. 101). Likewise, Morris and Olsen (2012) argue that Baptist methods for communal discernment were promoted by John Calvin, whose focus in the ‘Institutes of Christian religion’ was on church government. For Calvin, a key role in governing churches was the ‘jurisdiction over the correcting of faults’ of members of churches (Morris and Olsen, 2012, p. 23). The influence of Calvin’s focus on church governance upon individual behaviour can be seen in the early Baptist practice of Church Meetings. For example, Bedford Baptist Church Meeting minutes from 1712 state: ‘Elizabeth Parrett came here this day and did confess her sin for which she was suspended her communion and the church did renew their love to her as before’ (trans.1985, p. 2 and cited Egner, 2008, p. 23). Further still, the poem ‘The Church Meeting in Heaven’ by Reverend J Ryland of Northampton struck a similar tone still published in the Baptist Magazine in 1812:

“What singing! what shouting! what heavenly greeting!
 Shall there be, at that general, triumphant church-meeting.

...

May the foresight of glory constrain you and me,
 To consider what persons we ought now to be!
 To pray for your brother, my dear friend, fail not,
 For, alas! you can’t think what a heart I have got!
 So stubborn! so stupid! so carnal! so cold!
 One half of its wickedness, cannot be told.
 But, Lord! thou dost know it; thou only canst bend it
 Oh, search it! and break it! and wash it! and mend it!”

Ryland’s emphasis is on the total participation of all ‘brothers’ (sic) and that sin shall no longer prevent attendance. The poem’s prayerful tone considers the ‘foresight of glory’ to transform the carnal heart through repentance. Rosemary Taylor (1977) argued that this magazine as a national publication represented mainstream Particular Baptist thought and held the influential support of ministers such as ‘Andrew Fuller, John Ryland and James Hinton ... in avoiding discord within the denomination, it was often tame and dull, but it faithfully reflected the Baptist consensus’ (pp. 56-7).

In contrast, Baptist Church Meeting minutes became more formal in proceedings and content by 1850 for example: ‘Maze Pond tended to lead the way, confirming the previous minutes and listing the brethren attending the meeting by 1800, [records of ballot voting by 1825] and naming the chair by 1850’ (Egner, 2008, p. 24). One contributing factor to this shift is suggested by Charles Stovel (1835) argued that the church had become a ‘little cluster of

benevolent societies' (p. 1) which required greater administration and reporting to the Church Meeting. Egner (2008) shows 'the rise of voluntarism in society and the church' through the Church Meeting minutes dominated by reports from the Baptist Missionary Society, Sunday School, Maze Pond Benevolent and Tract society, Dorcas and Maternal Society, Ladies Guild, Maze Pond Christian Band' (p. 25). Wright (1991) argues that this development was a major 'distortion from Baptist roots and an accommodation' (p. 106) to become more acceptable in society. By this time the Baptist Union was sufficiently able to commission and produce manuals of how to run Church Meetings first between 1898-1924. Another manual written by Fred Bacon on running the Church Meeting was made available through Bristol Baptist College in 1981¹⁴ which reproduced a typical meeting agenda to include membership matters, finance, programme, correspondence and so forth (p. 99) and several chapters¹⁵ devoted to how to engage the church in making decisions together with ballots, voting and motions all present. Here the practice reflects the usage of Robert's Rules as discussed previously in Chapter 1.

The development of the content of the items discussed at a Church Meeting shows a theological concern for members to be effective witnesses on account of their holiness seen in the community at a point in time when churches were rural, smaller and poorer. As the church becomes more established and significant building projects are undertaken in urban areas (Gill, 2003, p. 203), the minutes reflect the new responsibility of the era to maintain buildings and a larger church community. The Baptist Church Meeting began as an integral part of worship, concerned with the witness and behaviour of members and grew into a broader concern for the maintenance of buildings and support of community groups and societies run for mission as the church became more established. This historical development of the role of the Church Meeting provides the context for slow wisdom, a wisdom that has been overwhelmed with the process of running an established church.

Biblical image of the church: the body of Christ

For Nell 'this body life' is critical to Baptist identity as it is based on a biblical model of the church as the body of Christ. I propose that Nell refers to the body with 1 Corinthians 12 in mind, where Paul writes:

¹⁴ Adopted by BUGB in 1992 (Egner, 2008, p. 39).

¹⁵ Note Chapters 10-12 especially (Bacon, 1981).

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ... ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Haymes et al (2008) likewise argue that the dominant biblical image¹⁶ of the church is a body with Christ as the head and the church as the body (p. 20-21). Fiddes (2006) argues further that:

The affirmation that all the members are gifted by the Spirit and have need of each other is not just that we share our *charismata* together. The point is that the members join to make the whole body visible, that is to allow *Christ* to manifest himself in the world, to make himself knowable and tangible through all his members (p. 67).

For Baptists, the practice of the Church Meeting is a visible sign of the Spirit's gift of discernment to all members. Therefore, members who do not regularly attend neglect the body of Christ, as Stephen at Gates suggests:

For me it's a living dynamic thing ... If somebody hasn't been to the church for the past year. And just because we're calling a youth minister or whatever it is they wanna turn up because they're a member and they want to vote. I want to say no, except I can't.

Both Nell and Stephen link the body and its living nature to the practice of the Church Meeting. Stephen highlights the particular responsibility of members to participate regularly in the Church Meeting to make critical decisions together. Nell understands the nature of participating in Baptist churches as linked to the principle of the priesthood of all believers. The project data shows the lived faith experience of Baptists uphold the participatory role of members in the church as a reflection of the body of Christ from scripture. 'This body life' is a way of being a church that sees expression and identity of a gathered church who are the body of Christ at the Church Meeting. Each member or each part has an important role to play in the living and dynamic nature of the Church Meeting.

Biblical image of the church: the priesthood of all believers

The biblical theme of the priesthood of all believers shapes the nature of the Baptist church and practice of the Church Meeting. As Frank Rees (2020) suggests the priesthood of all believers is 'first of all, an idea of the church, a church which is not centred in certain people

¹⁶ Gouldbourne argues this based on 1 Corinthians 12 and additional New Testament texts such as Romans 12.4-5: 'For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.', Ephesians 4.4: 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,' and Colossians 1.24: '²⁴ I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.' (20)

or certain functions, but an idea of the church as the people, people of and with God: the whole life of the whole people of God' (p. 181). For Baptists this nature of the church as the people is found in scripture. Within the Old Testament, Newman (2005) states the Baptist preference for adopting a corporate priestly identity based on the image of Israel as both a priestly kingdom and a holy nation is found in Exodus 19.5-6 which is superseded by the New Testament provision of 1 Peter 2.4-5 where Christians are made into a holy priesthood and to Revelation 5.9-15 where every tribe and nation are called to be a kingdom of priests serving God (p. 60). In 1 Peter 2, Peter writes to the early church calling Christians to be: ⁵ like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 2.5).

Lumpkin (1959) argues that the early Baptists took seriously this view of priesthood indicated by its use in the 'influential and formative' (p. 152) London 1644 confession of faith:

That all beleevers are a holy and ¹sanctified people, | and that sanctification is a spirituall grace of the new | Covenant, and the effect of the love of God, manifested | to the soule, whereby the believer is in truth and rea- | litie separated, both in soule and body, from all sinne and | dead works, through the blood of the everlasting Co- | venant , wherby he also preseth after a heavnly and | Evangelical perfection, in obedience to all the Com - | mands, which Christ as head and King in this new Co-|venant has prescribed to him (1644, reproduced Lumpkin, 1959, p. 164).

¹1 Cor.1.1 & 1 Pet. 2.9¹⁷

This statement is significant as it is the first document that was approved and shared among seven churches (Lumpkin, 1959, p. 144), therefore this is written evidence of where and how Baptist churches begin to associate with each other and develop principles and practice. Furthermore, this same Confession was taken to be the founding document for developing the Baptist church in America with the pilgrim fathers (Gilmore, 1963, p. 21)¹⁸. The 1644 London Confession speaks of a view of the church as a gathered body of people where each person is valued and sanctified through Christ. It calls a church to recognise the power and ability of all believers to be holy by grace. The practice of the Church Meeting reflects these early principles. At the Church Meeting, each believer participates in church life and discernment through the ability given to all by faith in the Spirit. Every member of a church is

¹⁷ Biblical texts are noted in the original confession.

¹⁸ Gilmore (1963) states that Roger Williams (1603-83) started first Baptist church in US at Providence, Rhode Island using the 1644 confession with particular emphasis on Jesus as one and only mediator, believers' holy priesthood and every member ministry (p. 21). See also Young (1996) for further explanation regarding Roger William's use of the Confession in the USA.

understood to be able to discern the mind of Christ for no mediator is required as every individual can have direct access to God (Newman, 2005, p. 50). Baptists held:

The theological conviction that Christ could and would make his will and mind known to his faithful ones gathered at his call and by his grace. So came the idea and practice of the church meeting, the church gathered together by Christ the Lord (Haymes et al, 2008, p. 51).

The priesthood of all believers is a distinctive part of Baptist churches and practice is typically expressed in discernment processes at the Church Meeting.

'This body life' today: Democracy and the Priesthood of All Believers

The Baptist understanding of the Church Meeting expressed by participants in this project offers a fresh reflection on democracy and voting in addition to the acceptance of biblical models explored earlier. As Payne (1944) suggests, a Baptist approach to practice involves change: 'There has been variety in our life. Things stressed in one generation have sometimes fallen into the background of the next' (p. 16). The participants identified democratic methods such as voting and listening to all as beneficial practices of discernment. Fiona stated: 'It is very, very democratic. Everyone has the opportunity to have a say, and to have an influence and to make a difference'. Barbara also referred to the Church Meeting as an 'open forum' and a place to 'air your views'. Barbara and Fiona's standpoints have commonality with American Baptist theologian Terry Young's assessment who writes:

The priesthood of believers and democratic congregational authority go hand in hand, to the extent that the church departs from democratic organization and government, so it ceases to be Christian in its principles and life (1996, p. 24).

Young (1996) indicates that the meaning of the priesthood of all believers and the practice of the Church Meeting has changed. It can be argued that a distorted understanding of the priesthood of all believers shifts the practice of the Church Meeting towards a model of democracy where the individual view and right to vote (in particular) is held tighter than the responsibility to discern together and remain part of the body of the church. In the UK, Haymes et al (2008) identify this shift whereby:

The resulting ecclesiology from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day emphasizes the individual believer, the local church as the voluntary association of individuals and a soteriology focused on individual conversion (p. 24).

Anglican Graham Tomlin (2014) states the emphasis of the priesthood of all believers ‘can lead to solitary individualism, a conviction that the essence of the Christian faith is a personal relationship with God, the church is secondary and rather optional extra’ (p. 64). In the USA, the concept of the priesthood of all believers is also referred to as soul competency or soul liberty meaning ‘individuals have the right to have direct access to God’ (Newman, 2005, p. 50). Newman (2005) and Freeman (2014) argue that the popularity of Baptist minister and theologian EY Mullins (1860-1928) developed the appreciation for soul competency as a distinctively Baptist belief whereby the church is only seen as ‘the social dimension of the soul’s competency (Newman, 2005, p. 52). Expounding further on Mullins’ priority of the individual over the church, Shurden (1998) argues that ‘without doubt, Baptists have often drifted into a perverted privatised faith’ (p. 325). He demonstrates this by analysing the emphasis of individual discipleship training courses used in some USA Baptist churches, particularly ‘Jesus and me or JAM sessions’ (Shurden, 1998, p. 329). Haymes et al (2008) and Shurden (1998) call for a re-envisioning of theology to refocus Baptist theology away from the primacy of the individual and to a corporate body of believers seen in discipleship, worship and the Church Meeting. It is this development in emphasis on the right and prominence of the individual that Newman (2005) identifies as having the ‘inevitable corollary’ (p. 55) of understanding the practice of the Church Meeting as a model of democracy in decision making which ought to be addressed.

This project identifies a further problem regarding the knowledge of Baptist practice, in particular, for newcomers to the Baptist church:

Stephen: They don’t know too much about it and we’re not doing an awful lot to help them to understand it. And we have a tension there, and I know what happens in that space. And forgive me because this is a mantra, I know you would hear over and over – it becomes a democracy.

Ruth: Rather than ...

Stephen: Rather than a theocracy¹⁹ which is about discerning the heart and mind of Christ. And we are not good at helping people to do that. In fact, we’re not good at helping people to discern full stop.

Early English Baptists promoted participation in the Church Meeting for members as each person was viewed as a member of the priesthood of all believers. Their purpose for meeting

¹⁹ Although Stephen here describes the Church Meeting as a theocracy which typically is used to describe a religious state governance model, I suggest it is reasonable in terms of his contrast provided within the code to democracy and the further explanation of discerning the mind of Christ that Christocracy as Gilmore (1963) suggests is an expression Stephen could have used.

was to discern the mind of Christ through the members of the Church Meeting not to express a democratic majority (Holmes, 2011). However, this project highlights that church members can falsely assume the Church Meeting operates on a democratic basis alone as the rationale of discernment is not widely known. The impact of this assumption is shown by Stephen and Nell's concerns above and shared by Gilmore (1963):

The church is not and must never be regarded as a democracy, for the power is not in the hands of the demos but of the Christos – it is a Christocracy. To grasp this delivers us from the worst kind of church meeting where the aim is not so much to discover the will of God as to gain a policy of one's choosing by a majority vote (p. 143).

Democratic methods are identified and appreciated by participants but as Haymes et al (2008) and Newman (2005) state if hyper-individualism is not challenged in churches the mind of Christ is not sought as a body and a majority vote wins.

Voting and the Church Meeting

Project participants identify that voting at the Church Meeting increases attendance, changes the expected outcome of agenda items and yet fails to listen to prophetic voices in the discernment process. A benefit of the church as the priesthood of all believers is to listen to the prophetic and hear the Spirit speaking through multiple and varied people (Fiddes, 2006). I suggest that if voting is the primary mode of discernment in a Church Meeting, the members cannot listen to the fullness of the Spirit. The individual right to vote without intentional listening to each other has become writ large in our identity and it fails to honour the intention of scripture and our Baptist forebears.

Votes must be made by members for critical decisions for the Church; to elect trustees, call a minister and approve significant financial items in line with rules held by the local congregation. However, this project shows that there is a broader appeal of voting for Baptists which goes above and beyond charitable law requirements and begins to steer Baptist theological identity. As Fiona expressed: 'We are Baptists and if we think there is a vote in the offing, we'll be there because we like a good vote'. Fiona is a member at Coleman Baptist Church which has a congregation of over 400 but the observed AGM had 39 members present. All the participating churches in this project had far more people attending services than attending Church Meetings. All churches allowed those attending the church to also observe the Church Meeting even though only members are permitted to vote. At the observed meetings the following attendance was recorded:

Hedger Baptist Church Meeting, 19 April 2018:
13 members present with 30 average service attendance

Jarman Baptist Church Meeting, 9 September 2018:
14 members present with 50 average service attendance

Gates Baptist Church Meeting, 28 January 2018:
29 members present with 90 average service attendance

Coleman Baptist AGM, 20 September 2018:
39 members present with 400 average of service attendance

The only vote taken in all the observed meetings was at Coleman to accept the accounts at the AGM. However, at the interview stage of the project, participants demonstrated that votes that draw members out to attend a Church Meeting are infrequent or controversial items.

In this study, Church Meetings are less well attended than church services. While smaller churches might achieve 40% of the worshipping congregation in Church Meeting attendance, the larger Church Meetings represented 10-30% of those attending services. At my previous church - Poynton Baptist Church - a typical Church Meeting drew 40 members with an average Sunday service attendance of 175. However, a Church Meeting that included a vote to call a minister would be larger, for example, the vote regarding my appointment drew out 102 members²⁰. Fiona's pithy remark 'Baptists like a good vote' seems apt to describe the reality of Church Meeting attendance, Baptists like to vote but do not generally attend a Church Meeting. If members only attend sporadically and for unusual agenda items, I argue they neglect the image of the church as a body and the role of the priesthood of all believers in a Baptist church.

Impact of discernment development

The birth of the Baptist church during the Reformation era with her pursuit of liberty and experience of consistent persecution brought to bear a distinctive theology and practice of the Church Meeting (Miller, 1900). As the church developed with building maintenance and expanded ministries to consider, it used new models of governance to manage decision-making (Egner, 2008). Historically gathering the church to worship signified a commitment to religious liberty which changed in its practice and application as Baptists became more established. While a focus on the individual and a language of rights has become established in the USA, the UK Baptist church shows a greater emphasis on the gathered church.

²⁰ Poynton Baptist Church Meeting minutes, November 2010.

This project has gathered the views of Baptist church members who remain committed to scriptural interpretations of the church as a body and as the priesthood of all believers. However, I show that the voting practice of the Church Meeting forms an understanding of discernment as a merely democratic method for newer members. Voting is known to be the most popular practice for Baptists, swelling the number of members attending the Meeting significantly which reinforces the belief in majority rule alone. The rationale for the Church Meeting is understood as a democratic endeavour rather than as an outworking of the gathered and covenanted church, being the body of Christ or as the priesthood of all believers. This project identifies slow wisdom as a way forward in discernment by drawing Baptists closer to our historic identity.

4. *'Slow' Wisdom: Identifying a Baptist practice of discernment*

A key contribution of this project is the identification of slow wisdom as a Baptist model for discernment. This chapter proceeds to outline the primary marks of slow wisdom identified by participants as 'slow' and found within patterns of prayer and prophetic voices heard at the Church Meeting. One element of prayer as testing in discernment is compared to Ignatian discernment. In contrast to previous research, I show slow wisdom is based on the reality of discernment as embodied knowledge, a Christian practical wisdom. I suggest that by embracing slow wisdom as embodied knowledge, the Church Meeting becomes liberating for participants. Drawing on the work of bell hooks' (2010) engaged pedagogy and practical wisdom as revitalising for education, I argue that a new appreciation of wisdom will renew the Church Meeting.

Baptist discernment is slow

Harry, Nell and Fiona, each from different sample churches acknowledge that discernment at a Church Meeting is slow. Nell said, 'You wouldn't expect decisions to be made at that meeting, because it takes time, doesn't it?' and Fiona: 'I expect it to unfold in time'. Indeed, when Jarman Baptist approached appointing a new children's worker the Meeting expanded in time significantly: 'It was a good solid ... two hours, two and a half hours' (Harry) which was four times the length of the observed Meeting. The observed sample Church Meetings ran as follows:

Jarman: Sunday after the service, 41 minutes.
Gates: Sunday after service and a shared lunch, 1 hour 49 minutes.
Hedger: Midweek 8 pm, 1 hour 50 minutes.
Coleman: Midweek 8 pm, 1 hour 52 minutes.

In part discernment is slow because 'I can see a pattern emerging of raising it up, putting it out there, giving it time, people having gone away, it's not a surprise (Fiona)'. Discernment is slow because an item to be discerned is outlined at a Church Meeting, and then returned to later to allow members time to think and pray and then return to discuss the matter again at a following Meeting. Meetings can be monthly, bi-monthly or even less, therefore the schedule itself creates a time lag. If an item for consideration is outlined in brief to members, for example in July, then after the summer, given a fuller explanation in September, to be voted then upon in November, five to six months can be a typical timeframe for important agenda items.

Different amounts of time are given to different types of decisions. For example, Colin recounts a proposal to sell a flat operating as a rental property and owned by Coleman Baptist:

One wouldn't expect a decision on a subject like that to be made at the next Church Meeting, You'd have thought it would be carried over, unless the trustees have a firm set of suggestions and recommendations to make which, erm, the Church Meeting as a whole is broadly in agreement with. Otherwise, it needs to be held over to another meeting.

Colin has particular expectations regarding timescales for significant agenda items as above. He did not expect the decision to be made at the next Meeting, or indeed any time soon. The process of discerning together regarding a decision like selling a property is expected to be revealed as slowly as the Meetings occur. From Coleman Baptist Church too, Fiona expects discernment to come from careful consideration and 'unfold in time'. The timescale for each decision discerned is generated by the nature of the agenda item, the trustees' view, and achieving agreement among members. Nell described: 'You try to bring everyone with you', for the risk of rejection of an idea decreases if it is introduced gradually. Discernment at the Church Meeting enables committed members of the church to pray and consider what God might be saying to a congregation. Over time, slowly and carefully deliberated decisions are discerned as part of being a Baptist church.

Patterns of prayer and discernment at the Church Meeting

Participants identified the style of extempore prayer, the presence of intercessory prayer, prayer as a permeating presence of the Spirit and prayer as a tool for testing in discernment, which I show indicates prayer is key to slow wisdom. Each pattern of prayer is valued by participants and identified as critical to discernment, however 'more prayer needed' was a recurring phrase in every interview. Daniel explained to me:

Our Church Meetings always charge[d] with so many other things, we don't give enough time for prayers in this session. For me, I believe for us to be able to discern the mind of Christ we need to be in a session that we give ample space for prayers. Although we want to do that, we don't do that very often (Daniel).

Prayer at a Church Meeting expresses Baptist identity through its extempore style, covenantal care of members in intercession and recognition of the Spirit's presence in the gathered church. Prayer is celebrated for a testing role in discernment which has parallels in Ignatian forms of discernment.

Extempore prayer embodies Baptist theological beliefs

All of the observed Church Meetings began with an extempore prayer led by the minister. Minister Matthew from Jarman Baptist opened the Meeting held after the Sunday service with the following prayer:

Our loving God we have met together and worshipped you. We have sung your praises. We have listened to your word. We have prayed for your world. And we have talked to one another over tea and coffee. And now we come to reflect on the life of your people here. And as you have been with us in all of these activities this morning. We pray that you will be with us now that your Spirit will be evident among us, and this too will be a time of worship of thankfulness of commitment with a readiness to serve. We pray this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (Matthew, Field notes 9/9/18).

Desmond at Hedger Baptist began the midweek evening meeting with a reading from 1 Corinthians 12.12-31 and sharing aloud this prayer:

So, Father, we thank you because your church has been built on a tremendous foundation - our Lord Jesus Christ himself. We thank you Lord that we are part of that Church; with you as the bride and us as the bridegroom; which is not only here at (Hedger) but around the world, brothers and sisters, we have everywhere. Lord, you have charged us with sharing your light in this part of (London). It is a task that we bless you for, it's a task that we struggle with and it's a privilege to be part of. And so, we pray as we come tonight as your people - part of your body to show again the things that vex us here at (Hedger), that to reflect that we are working on and how you continue to share your truth. We pray for those who are enroute tonight and we recognise this meeting as the first in the year on a Thursday evening, challenging for some but we thank you for those that are here. We ask you Lord to open our minds, give us a fresh approach, fresh understanding as we go through things that are important to us. So, hear us in our prayer Lord. Amen.

Members: Amen (a hearty loud sound!) (Field notes: 19/4/18).

Observed extempore prayer at the Church Meeting embodies Baptist theological convictions regarding the presence of Christ and the Spirit in discernment. Matthew's emphasis shows the Church Meeting to be a continuation of Sunday worship with the Spirit's presence enabling both reflection on church life and helping the members to serve. Desmond's prayer acknowledges Christ as the foundation of the church at Hedger and around the world. He also notes the difficulties that 'vex' us on the agenda. He appeals to the Lord for new wisdom to enable the church to share in God's light and truth.

Baptists demonstrate theological belief in the presence of Christ and the Spirit when members are gathered both in worship and, I argue, at the Church Meeting. Chris Ellis (2004) argues free or extempore prayer in Baptist worship is an embodied expression of how 'our

relationship with God is expressed and developed [with a] Christological focus and pneumatological context' (p. 114). In particular, Ellis (2004) highlights the historic importance of free prayer in contrast to written prayer as formative in the origins of the Baptist church: 'There was a concern for 'spiritual worship' expressed through extempore prayer and a resistance to written prayer ... [followed by] persecution regarding rejecting the Book of Common Prayer in 1662' (2004, p. 32). As argued in Chapter 3, the Church Meeting expresses theological conviction in the gathered church. The distinctive practices of the Baptist church were forged in persecution which included free prayer in discernment. Desmond's opening extempore prayer expresses a Baptist emphasis on Christ who calls and gathers believers together as the church and Matthew's highlights a hope of the Spirit's presence. The observed free prayer expresses Ellis' point that prayer in worship is an embodiment of Baptist theological belief in the gathered church including the Church Meeting.

Intercessory prayer indicates the covenantal nature of Church Meeting

The presence of intercessory prayer at the Church Meeting indicates a Practical Theology of care for members as an expression of slow wisdom. Intercession was particularly prominent in smaller churches like Hedger when several members chipped in their view on a member's poor health or relating to a personal crisis. Toyin at Hedger said that prayer was important at the Church Meeting 'especially when we go over the pastoral role' of membership. Pastoral care is integral to Baptist membership. Within the liturgy for welcoming new members in *Gathering for worship* (BUGB, 2005) existing members covenant together and are asked: 'Will you pray for A... and do all you can to help her/him/them to witness to Jesus Christ?' (p. 79). The care shown in listening to the extensive pastoral needs of the congregation and their family members expresses the nature of covenant within the Church Meeting. Oudtshoorn (2013) argues that prayer is a Practical Theology concern as it explores the participation of God in the world. In particular, he states:

Prayers of petition look to the active presence of God in our present time and context as a bridge to our future and the future of our world. Prayer is, thus, based on the promise of God to 'be' with the church as the one who wants to actively respond to its prayers (2013, p. 144).

Baptist intercessory or prayers of petition recognise the presence of God when the church is gathered and calls for the participation of God especially in pastoral matters. Ellis (2004) states that 'pastoral praying manifests in concern for the local congregation as a community, whose members are called to care for one another, and which expresses that care through petition'

(p. 124). Through intercessory prayer at the Church Meeting, Baptists ‘endeavour to actively relate to the God of their theology’ (Oudtshoorn, 2013, p. 146).

Prayer as testing discernment

Prayer is known by Baptists to generate an atmosphere conducive to discernment and prayer offers a testing role in slow wisdom. Nell at Hedger said prayer ‘permeating the atmosphere’ enabled discernment. Likewise, Harry at Jarman spoke of an unconscious awareness of the Spirit’s presence in which discernment occurs:

Hopefully, we do get it right most of the time and that is the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So, I do believe that but I don’t think I’m consciously saying ‘What’s the Spirit saying to me?’ It’s ... we’re just getting through it and the Spirit is hopefully pervading our hearts and minds to give us the right decisions (Harry).

Hedger and Jarman Baptist expect prayer to pervade and permeate the members’ hearts to discern the mind of Christ effectively. Prayer is limited to a conducive atmosphere by these smaller sample churches as an expression of slow wisdom.

However, in larger sample churches, prayer as a form of testing in discernment is used in slow wisdom. *Love *Anytown* is a new evangelistic project for Coleman Baptist. Carole, the minister, has a frank and animated personality which combined with a bold floral-patterned shirt made for an overwhelmingly confident presentation for *Love *Anytown*. She shared a vision she had had while praying on an USA beach holiday of a two-day outreach programme with ‘loads of projects, we might visit a nursing home, give out sweets to local businesses, do someone’s garden’ to be a positive witness in the community (Coleman field notes 20/9/18). At interview, Carole said:

I thought this could be something we could do ... and I say to Matt [Associate Minister] ‘What d’ya reckon?’ and we’ve knocked it around a bit and Rachel [Associate Minister] as well. So, then I told the deacons, and they go ‘Oh yeah great’ and then to the church (Carole).

Prayer is seen as important in this pattern in terms of the minister praying for guidance and then testing it at a Church Meeting over some time. One benefit of this approach is that the minister can frame the delivery of a new initiative and avoid pre-meeting discussions between members that are lacking in detail. Topics for prayer are then focused on ministerial-led items and are less generic. At Coleman, this pattern is expected and preferred as it limits surprises and reduces the risk of tension by asking the Meeting to make quick decisions. Prayerful

discernment is not understood as revelation in this pattern but as a method of testing alongside reflection, discussion and time. An item is brought to the Meeting by the minister which has already been tested by other staff members as well.

Ignatian discernment and slow wisdom

This project argues that discernment as ‘testing a project through prayer’ is a development from early Baptist discernment which understood discernment as ‘testing if a member’s actions were good or evil’. In Ignatian thought, discernment is understood in terms of being able to test whether an idea has a source of good or evil, of God or from a human desire. Morris and Olsen (2012) argue that testing is first seen in Ignatian models of discernment where the ‘Spiritual Exercises’ explore the importance of imagination, reason, biblical connections, experience, testing the spirits and feelings’ (p. 22) which determined discernment to be ‘the individual spiritual capacity to distinguish good from what is opposed to it’ (p. 20). Discernment as testing; good or evil, is seen in the minutes of the 1714 Chesham Baptist Church Meeting regarding Brother Widmer’s Eldership election. Other church members thought he was an improper candidate as: ‘Once in harvest he told some maids that if they would go to the other side of the hedge, he could quickly warm them [with a kiss] (p. 11)’. After lengthy reflection upon the matter, the Church Meeting minutes note:

Our judgement is that as there was no evil intended by Brother Widmer either in what he said or did in this case and it not being customary to him, there was neither good nor evil in what he said or did (p. 11-12).

This project has recognized a shift in the content of items to be discerned, no longer is the individual behaviour of members annotated and discussed in such a way but ideas like Love Anytown are tested by a prayerful discernment over time. This also echoes findings held by Malcolm Egner (2008) regarding Church Meeting agendas. At Coleman Baptist, discernment regarding a new project can be understood as a process of testing an idea from a minister with other ministers, lay leaders (deacons) and other members at the Church Meeting. Discernment for large churches occurs within a broader framework of communication methods that include the Church Meeting and a suite of other networks within the church. While this discernment practice identified here is most explicit within a large church as opposed to a small Baptist church, the principle for Baptists remains, discernment has been reformed from testing evil and good spirits or actions to testing an idea for the development of the church together in prayer.

Discernment and epistemology

Baptists typically use the Bible as a basis for discerning all matters according to the Declaration of Principle (1873) as argued by Holmes (2011) and Grenz (2002). A surprising feature of this research was that participants did not reference scripture as part of discernment. I argue Baptists instead use embodied knowledge to ratify discernment at the Church Meeting.

Harry is a well-educated, middle-aged White man who is a solicitor and partner in his firm. A strikingly confident host, he welcomed me into his 1930s suburban semi-detached home with ease. Our interview took place in the front room, which was overflowing with board games, books, records and numerous collectable antiques in glass display cabinets dotted around the room. After sharing a lemon and ginger herbal infusion, Harry talked about his passion for liberal Christianity and his deep and long-serving commitment to Jarman Baptist. When I asked him ‘What does discernment include?’ He quipped: ‘Damascus Road ... that would be wonderful, in a way, wouldn’t it?’ Harry connects the process of discernment with revelation from God. The conversion of Saul in Acts 9.3-9 is seen inside the church and outside it as a description of discernment. Blinded by light and startled by a booming voice, the way forward is clear to those who experience revelation on the road to Damascus.

The Damascus Road narrative identifies a place as an *axis mundi* where a human-divine encounter. It is this style of revelation that Harry yearns for in discernment at the Church Meeting. Anglican John Inge (2003) argues that a physical place in which humanity encounters Jesus Christ ‘can be seen in an incarnational perspective, places are the seat of relations or place of meeting between God and the world’ (2003, p. X). In this seat of relations, an encounter with Christ is a relational one, it is ‘bound in relationship with creator and covenant love’ (Inge, 2003, p. 47) which is the locus of God’s relations with humanity. Inge highlights that the incarnation celebrates the materiality of the world, and as such affirms both body and place. This is a development from his portrayal of the promise of land for the people of God in the Old Testament to a far broader appreciation of God’s revelation in all manner of places. Similarly, a place of divine encounter is described as a thin place in Celtic spirituality as Robinson states: ‘The holy place is seen as a physical location where the membrane between this world and a reality beyond is especially thin, where a transcendent reality impinges on the immanent’ (1997, p. 1). Harry hopes for discernment that reveals a transcendent reality impinging on the immanent. However, he knows this is wishful thinking for a Church Meeting;

‘that would be wonderful’, wouldn’t it?’ This thesis shows that the received, scripture-based knowledge of discernment as revelation in a place, is different to the lived reality for Baptists.

Other interviewees such as Fiona said: ‘I don’t expect ... ‘Oh yes that’s it!’ [clicks fingers pointing up]’ and Nell likewise said discernment is not ‘written in the sky’ and gestured the shape of a banner pulled by an aeroplane. Baptist church members motioned towards the sky when asked about discernment. Their fingers illustrated their view of the style and mode of revelation described in Acts 9 as ‘light from heaven’ (v3) or a ‘hearing a voice’ (v4). Revelation is believed to come from above, as if God directs our decisions on which way to walk with immediate effect. Harry yearned that the sky would resound with the sound of God’s voice but knew that did not normally happen. Fiona and Nell both indicate that discernment might have a connection upwards above the earth.

From the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11.1-9) to Mount Sinai (Exodus 19.18) to the voice of God from heaven affirming Jesus Christ (Luke 3.18), God is often understood to reside above the earth. Meanwhile, anthropologist Mircea Eliade (1957) connects high places and revelation by arguing that in the Davidic era, theophany, or revelation occurs in high places like mountains. Eliade states:

Images of opening in the sacred enclosure are seen, communication with the gods is made possible; hence there must be a door to the world above, by which the gods can descend to earth and man can symbolically ascend to heaven. (1957, p. 26)

Eliade illuminates part of the biblical connection between the sky and revelation, in scripture there are examples of places of divine revelation that function as a stairway to heaven from the earth. This idea of revelation affects the way Baptists understand discernment even today. Baptists identify that discernment at the Church Meeting does not reflect biblical divine encounters like the Damascus Road.

The participants of this project did not use biblical references or images to anchor beliefs about discernment, instead I show that Baptists use slow wisdom as embodied wisdom to discern. Holmes argues that when considering how the mind of Christ is discerned: ‘the fundamental answer, of course, is through reflection on the scriptures’ (Holmes, 2011, p. 185). He suggests that the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle (1873) is the basis for Baptists to discern using scripture. He argues that there is a ‘repeated insistence that the gathered church will find

Christ's call in shared reflection and exegesis of the scriptures and not otherwise' (2011, p. 175). Similarly, Grenz (2002) argues from the 1833 Hampshire Confession (USA) that:

The self-conscious beginning point for the distinct emphasis of the Baptist tradition lies in a non-negotiable commitment to the as the primary source book for individual and corporate Christ life (p. 82).

Holmes (2010) proposes that while the primacy of the Bible for Baptists is not particularly different to others from the Evangelical tradition (p. 412), he suggests that Baptists use of the Bible is seen in three areas of practice: community and inspiration, Christology, life of the church. Holmes (2010) emphasizes a Baptist reliance on shared interpretation of scripture by church members with the guidance of the Holy Spirit (p. 414-5), as the 'mode of transmission of the authority of Christ (p. 418) and discovered through the church as 'primarily the authority of the living Christ who makes his ways known to His gathered people through his Spirit in His Word' (p. 420). For Holmes and Grenz, Baptists rely on a shared interpretation of scripture guided by the Spirit and shaped by the life of Christ at the Church Meeting.

However, this project shows through qualitative research that Baptist church members and ministers do not easily identify the role of scripture in discernment. Instead, discernment is shown to be a shared task, based on the biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers (see Chapter 3) and the presence of the Spirit is highly valued as a marker of discernment. Project participants shared that discernment in practice is different to the models of discernment identified in scripture. Discernment is not written in the sky. There is no blinding light, no audible voice, no burning bush, no divine ladder,²¹ it is not immediate revelation from God to an individual in a revelatory place but a shared experience that is overwhelmingly slow.

Discernment as embodied Christian practical wisdom

Long-standing members of Baptist Churches identify feeling a sense of comfort in slow wisdom as critical to discerning the mind of Christ. This divine gut confirms the mind of Christ has been discerned and alongside the bodily experience of participating in Church Meetings, Baptists experience 'divine disclosure' (Graham, 2009). From this experience, members form an embodied Christian practical wisdom that expands Baptist theological understanding of the body of Christ to learn from diverse members (hooks, 2010) as seen in prophetic contributions

²¹ Revelation is seen through light and the voice of God speaking in a revelatory fashion in Acts 9, in the story of Moses through a burning bush (Exodus 3) and in the story of Jacob's dream about a ladder to heaven (Genesis 28).

of unexpected members (Holmes, 2011). It is fundamental to slow wisdom to recognise Baptist discernment as an embodied Christian practical wisdom.

Accepting or changing decisions is identified by participants such as Colin and Barbara as generating a feeling of comfort, which I suggest forms a Baptist divine gut as a critical tool for validating that the mind of Christ has been discerned. Colin is a White retired man who volunteered to be interviewed immediately after the observation at Coleman Baptist Church. He told me that he had been a member of three Baptist churches in the past and wanted to share his broad level of experience regarding discernment at the Church Meeting. We arranged for his interview to take place at Coleman, as Colin was concerned as to where I would be able to park near his house; a common concern among Londoners. Having arrived early, the office manager at Coleman had made me a cup of tea and showed me to a large meeting room designated for our interview. Apart from a selection of padded purple chairs, a small coffee table, a data projector mounted on the ceiling, and a pile of youth bibles, the room was completely bare. Colin shared his views on discernment with me:

Ruth: Do you think we ever think we discern the mind of Christ at a Church Meeting?

Colin: I have known it.

Ruth: What was it that helped you know that had been achieved?

Colin: Because I felt entirely comfortable about a decision that had been made. A recommendation that the trustees had made.

...

The figures were given at the Church Meeting. And I think if the funding is not available that's ... um ... you could say that's Christ leading, couldn't you? In some circumstances.

Colin's comfort is generated by the elected trustees' presentation. He acknowledged the role of the trustees for having previously discussed a matter and providing sufficient financial information which contributed further to his sense of comfort. An overwhelming sense of comfort in accepting a trustee decision is identified by Colin as a sign that the mind of Christ has been discerned.

Conversely, Barbara acknowledged a sense of comfort when a decision made at a previous Church Meeting at Jarman was changed. Barbara is a White retired female member at Jarman Baptist Church. When we met, she had glamorously tinted and set hair, was fully made up and wearing a crisply ironed pale pink shirt. Her gold and heavily adorned charm bracelet clinked against the metal edge of the go-pak table in the anonymous church meeting room we were

assigned. Barbara was most animated in recounting the tale of calling the previous minister to the church which she had been involved with as church secretary:

Barbara: Before X came, we had already appointed someone. And I wasn't 100% but I felt we'd made a rushed decision, so we went along with it.

-Ruth: ahm-

And when we called him, he said he'd changed his mind, he didn't come. So, we had to start the whole process over again.

Ruth: Yup.

Barbara: And X was one of the candidates. And the Church Meeting agreed to call him, so I phoned him that night. And he said that he was also thinking that he'd been asked to go to a church nearer to where he lived. Which would mean no upheaval, the boys could stay in the same school and everything. Oh, and I prayed. How I prayed! And then he changed his mind and decided to come to us. And that was, so we had chosen someone, but they hadn't chosen us. So, we were disappointed. Then we felt we were exonerated because we had made the wrong decision and then made the right decision. And X came it all fell into place.

-Ruth: ahm-

Yeah, I felt the mind of Christ in that. Definitely.

For Barbara, plans that 'fall into place' indicated that the right choice had been made and that mind of Christ can be felt in this decision. For both Barbara and Colin, a sense of comfort is found in decisions that feel right as an individual and as part of the membership as a whole. It is this feeling of comfort in discernment that generates a divine gut sense which contributes to an embodied Christian practical wisdom for Baptists.

Therefore I show that Baptists use a larger range of epistemological sources in discernment than previously recognised including embodied knowledge. Embodied knowledge is a type of knowing 'where the body itself knows how to act' (Tanaka, 2011, p. 149). Moreover, embodied knowledge is based on 'Merleau-Ponty's sense, [where] experiences layer as sedimentation in one's body so that one gains the salience with which one can read a situation and see what it is that needs to be done here, now, within the horizon of one's calling' (Scharen, 2016, p. 174). Therefore, embodied knowledge is part of Christian practical wisdom as it is particular to a context and operates as a situated knowledge. In this sense, embodied knowledge exists within the Aristotelian category of phronesis as 'wisdom that attends to the lived experience' (Walton, 2014, p. 10). Embodied knowledge is a way of articulating theology in practice that recognises movements like feminism 'have shifted our attention to the power and place of the body in knowing' (Miller-McLemore, 2013, p. 747) but emphasises practical know-how rather than theologies of the body. I am mindful of the critique of Miller McLemore (2013) that 'when practical theologians use the term embodied to mean theology in practice, the actual body often drops out of sight' (p. 749). I show that slow wisdom recognises a regular pattern of

bodies gathered together in the same room meeting as the body of Christ at the Church Meeting. The lived experience for Baptists trying to discern the mind of Christ is that an embodied knowledge grows over time and is felt within the physical body of long-standing members like Barbara and Colin. I argue that participants reflected within their bodies for an epistemological cue for discerning the mind of Christ; described at interviews as feeling discernment, a bodily sense of comfort, a sense of peace or sensing the weight of a matter (see chapter 5). This divine gut is both an index of the presence of Christ and a recognition of the Spirit's movement.

Bodily practice and being the body of Christ

When Baptists discern together, Baptists honour each other as members of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.4-27), who gather together to encounter presence of Christ (Matthew 18.20), as members of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2.5) and as recipients of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.1-18)²². The bodily practice of attending the Church Meeting expresses these Baptist theological beliefs and remind Baptists of their commitment to the gathered church as the body of Christ. Baptist bodies are recognised through the model of discernment at the Church Meeting as each individual member has to be present to participate. Once present, members are called to listen with their ears and hearts to others, to raise a hand, to speak, to interject and to vote. When all these bodied members participate in discernment together, a common divine gut leads members to a feeling of comfort and onto a shared confidence of knowing the mind of Christ. It is these Baptist bodies using embodied knowledge, that sense, feel and are comforted by, when they resolve that the mind of Christ has been revealed. It is Baptist bodies that determine when the Spirit has spoken and when discernment has occurred. It is these same bodies that are broken by conflict, wither with dull agendas and dis-member from the Church Meeting when other members of the body are poorly treated.

By recognising and honouring the physical participation at a Church Meeting and embodied Christian practical wisdom used in discernment, I suggest that Baptists are led to a fuller understanding of the body of Christ where:

Embodiment ... points to the performative, incarnational nature of theology...bodily practice is the agent and vehicle of Divine disclosure and the faithful practices of the body of Christ are the sacraments of suffering and redemption (Graham, 2009, p. 80).

²² See chapter 3 for further discussion.

As Graham (2009) suggests, the vehicle of discernment provides divine disclosure for Baptists gathering as the body of Christ. In practice, the Church Meeting enables members to encounter the diversity of Christ's presence and illuminate God's purposes for the church. I argue that the bodily practice of attending and discerning together at a Church Meeting forms an embodied Christian practical wisdom that expands the ability of church members to identify and know the mind of Christ and to hear the Spirit speak as an expression of being the body of Christ.

Slow wisdom and bell hooks' practical wisdom

This project demonstrates how Baptists discern by an embodied Christian practical wisdom to agree or change Church Meeting decisions. In contrast to the environment of the Church Meeting, bell hooks (2010) presents her practical wisdom from the context of the college classroom where the shared task of learning requires an open approach by students and teachers which enables the reinvention of education. hooks' reflection on communal learning offers a parallel to this project's reflection on communal discernment and offers fresh language to consider using when describing discernment in the Church Meeting.

bell hooks' (1952-2021) has a broad appeal as a 'career-socialist activist, feminist, intellectual, poet, author, cultural critic, academic and teacher' (Wisneski, 2013, p. 73) with a 'global impact on teaching and learning for freedom and liberation' (Troutman, 2020, p. 303). Born Gloria Jean Watkins in Kentucky USA, hooks' pen name honours her family in her work by using a 'lowercase pseudonym of her great-grandmother's name' (Valdivia, 2002, p. 431) to differentiate her work from her identity. Within hooks' work on education the influences of her early schooling (Burke, 2004), Paulo Freire's pedagogical theory (Darder, 2018) and the influence of Buddhist Thien Nhat Hah (Yancy, 2009) can be seen. For this project, the use of bell hooks is concentrated on her three *Teaching* books (1994, 2003, 2010) in which she presents a central theme of engaged pedagogy and its effect on communal learning and the production of practical wisdom. hooks (1994) is motivated to write to reform education in the USA, stating:

There is a serious crisis in education. Students often do not want to learn and teachers do not want to teach. More than ever before in the recent history of this nation, educators are compelled to confront our biases that have shaped teaching practices in our society and create new ways of knowing, different strategies for the sharing of knowledge (p.12).

Her reflection as a teacher on this issue leads her to promote engaged pedagogy as a new approach to epistemology and education which as Troutman (2020) suggests also ‘offers ways to engage in critical pedagogy across all spaces of learning and communicated through stories of experience and honest appraisals of flawed social institutions and their negative effects’ (p. 303). I suggest the model of slow wisdom creates a new way of knowing for Baptists in discernment which will enable the Church Meeting to be more inclusive. hooks, likewise, argues for change within education through the use of engaged pedagogy. I propose that slow wisdom and hooks’ practical wisdom are united in seeking liberation and hopeful change.

hooks (2010) defines practical wisdom as knowledge that cannot be separated from experience and as a necessary part of critical thinking (p.186). She offers an outline of the impact of practical wisdom in the learning context:

Practical wisdom shows us that all genuine learning requires of us a constant open approach, a willingness to engage invention and reinvention, so that we might discover those places of radical transparency where knowledge can empower (p. 186).

The openness of practical wisdom with its capacity for renewal leads hooks (2010) to conclude:

Practiced wisdom helps us to remember that ideas are not fixed and static but always subject to change. Hence there is the capacity of ideas to illuminate and heighten our sense of wonder, our recognition of the power of mystery (p. 188).

For hooks, one outcome of practical wisdom is for learners and teachers to be open to new ideas and change within learning. The Baptist divine gut used by participants like Colin and Barbara shows a similar approach in discernment, where both positive and corrective action at the Church Meeting are valued. Discerning in this way, Baptists are free to make new or change previous decisions through embodied knowledge. As such Baptists might use hooks’ language of being open to new ideas in discernment, for the work of the Spirit is neither fixed nor static but always transforming and renewing (John 3.8). Baptists could acknowledge that discernment is a form of wisdom that allows churches to make and undo decisions as a renewal of intervention. I show slow wisdom offers a willingness to engage in the wonder of changing decisions when discerning as led by the Spirit, and as such it echoes hooks’ language of her practical wisdom as open to change.

Embodied slow wisdom found in prophetic participation

Another expression of embodied knowledge is the participation of unexpected people who feel an overwhelming need to contribute to discernment at the Church Meeting. I suggest this shows the prophetic participation of all members is part of slow wisdom which echoes the Baptist structure of membership (Holmes, 2011). I contrast the prophetic participation of unexpected members to hooks' emphasis on engaged pedagogy for students. hooks argues that the participation of students in a community of learning opens up new ways of knowing (hooks, 1994, p. 58). I suggest that the Baptists need to acknowledge and embrace similar new ways of knowing through embodied slow wisdom found in both hearing unexpected voices and honouring their prophetic contributions as a work of the Spirit at the Church Meeting.

Maureen is a White retired woman who has been a member at Gates Baptist Church for around 40 years; most of her adult life. I was warmly welcomed into Maureen's immaculate home complete with net curtains, soft pastel-toned décor and cross-stitch pieces on the walls. Maureen lives close to Gates Baptist church, which is in a popular suburban village, nestled alongside several take-away restaurants, charity shops and a small supermarket. Maureen said she was not keen on speaking in public at all, but she told me about a Church Meeting when she felt 'that sense that I need to say something'. She continued:

It's the Holy Spirit because that's how it is. But I also sense that it's, you can tell, this sounds judgmental, but I don't mean it to be, you can tell when people speak up sometimes and they're against something or challenging whatever is being discussed about ... that it's them coming out, not godly. It's their viewpoint. I can't really put it into words.

For Maureen, being willing to speak at the Church Meeting is dependent on the Holy Spirit's guidance and is necessary to test another member's contribution. Maureen's experience of discernment as testing or judging other members' contributions fits a slow wisdom pattern of prayer and an historic understanding of discernment as discussed in Chapter 3. Maureen's experience of sensing the Spirit guiding her to speak in the Meeting is taken by her to be a marker of genuine discernment. She identifies that although she would be an unexpected voice at the Meeting, she acts against her natural self by speaking aloud. Yet being a Baptist open to the Spirit she can judge contributions in order to discern the mind of Christ. The embodiment of being a Baptist is found in being able to sense and judge in discernment and share it at the Meeting.

Echoes of Maureen's experience regarding the Spirit's guidance are also found in Matthew's account of difficult Church Meetings. Matthew is a White Baptist minister who has decades of

local and regional experience of fractious Church Meetings. He highlighted the ‘prophetic’ role where one member who did not ordinarily speak ‘talked sense’ and ‘God’s word’ into a Church Meeting.

Matthew: I was really struck by somebody, and there were a couple of meetings where a different person on each occasion, somebody spoke - I didn’t know that church that well, so I don’t what their roles were ... they weren’t a deacon or a leader. But they spoke and they changed the whole tenor of the Church Meeting because they talked sense. And it was as if people then began to talk to each other in a different way and you felt the whole Church Meeting turn on this fulcrum of this one person speaking ... [It is] really difficult to put my finger on what it was but there was a clear change of tone and people listened and responded.

Ruth: Might you say it was prophetic?

Matthew: I think so, yeah. yes. That’s the language that I would use to describe it...

Their words kinda spoke into the situation and they spoke God’s words into the situation.

-Ruth: ahm-

Matthew: They didn’t speak in terms of ‘God has said to me’ or something like that. They just spoke from the heart.

Matthew observed that an unexpected member changed the discernment process because the person ‘talked sense’. The interjection of new knowledge changed the tone and outcome of the Meeting. He identifies sense and God’s word coming from the ‘heart’ which helps to discern the mind of Christ. The contribution of an unexpected voice brought a prophetic aspect to the discernment process.

Although Maureen and Matthew observed that unusual people contributed to the Meeting which was identified as a sign of discerning the mind of Christ, I argue that the Church Meeting anticipates prophetic speech through its structure of participation. All members can speak at a Church Meeting, and all members are expected to be able to contribute due to the Baptist conviction that the Spirit speaks and leads all Christians as part of the priesthood of all believers. Nell shared her thoughts on the value of hearing the prophetic at the Church Meeting: ‘The majority isn’t always right. Often, it’s the lone voice that is right. The voice in the wilderness that is right, not the majority’.

Baptists’ concern for participation in the Church Meeting is not based on democratic principles, instead, as Holmes (2012) highlights it was the early Baptist commitment to the priesthood of all believers and hearing every member’s voice that:

... pre-date contemporary democratic structures by many decades. More often these served as prophetic protests in favour of recognising the intrinsic worth of every human being, rather than a mirror of current culture (p. 102).

The role of the prophetic shared by Holmes (2012) highlights the transformative nature of the Church Meeting as the structure of membership enables a recognition of every member's voice, ability and status to speak prophetically and contribute to discernment. Nell suggests that the prophetic role of the Spirit includes listening to unpopular voices calling for change; also referring to prophetic literature²³ associated with John the Baptist. Here is an important contributing factor towards slow wisdom, to one that does not quickly take a majority vote but enables the prophetic unexpected voices to lead the discernment process.

The Baptist practice of slow wisdom seeks to hear the Spirit in the world and recognises when the Spirit calls members in discernment to speak out. Slow wisdom shows a fresh outlook on the Spirit and the practice of faith for Baptists. Being led by the Spirit to speak for shy members is felt to be a sign of discernment especially when these unexpected voices generate knowledge that speaks into difficult situations. Knowing how to discern through seeking a sense of comfort and unexpected members 'talking sense' while led by the Spirit shapes a form of embodied slow wisdom that is practised by Baptists at the Church Meeting.

Prophetic participation and bell hooks' engaged pedagogy

hooks argues that the task of education is to engage all students in the pursuit of new knowledge that can only be generated from embodied participation in a community of learning. As shown above, slow wisdom uses embodied knowledge to discern, in particular, it recognises prophetic participation as bringing a new perspective which changes the discernment outcome for the Meeting. hooks' engaged pedagogy is based on the participation of all students and recognises their embodied knowledge as necessary for gaining new knowledge in the classroom. In this sense, I suggest slow wisdom correlates to hooks' engaged pedagogy through a shared emphasis on the experiential and multi-voiced search for embodied knowledge.

Learning, for hooks, is seen as participative and as embodied in an engaged pedagogy in which there is room for every voice. Engaged pedagogy is 'a teaching strategy that aims to restore students' will to think, and their will to be fully self-actualized. The central focus of engaged

²³ See Isaiah 40.3 and Matthew 3.3 (and parallels).

pedagogy is to enable students to think critically' (hooks, 2010, p. 8). As such, hooks' approach encourages students to be critical thinkers rather than 'passive recipients of ways of knowing' (hooks, 2010, p. 185). The pursuit of knowledge is achieved for hooks by participation in learning:

Understanding that every student has a valuable contribution to offer to a learning community means that we honor all capabilities, not solely the ability to speak. Students who excel in active listening also contribute much to the formation of community. This is also true of students who may not speak often but when they speak (sometimes only when reading required writing) the significance of what they have to say far exceeds those of other students who may always openly discuss ideas (2010, p. 22).

In addition to the participation of students, hooks (2010) acknowledges the embodied nature of learning as important in engaged pedagogy. hooks delights in students as an embodied presence which she defines as the reality of eros (or desire) seen in daily life (2010, p. 153) through the healing power of hugs (ibid, p. 155), love in pursuing knowledge (ib. p. 159) and a radical erotic self (ib. p. 177). She argues for nurturing learning through recognising the embodied presence of students to achieve full participation by:

Expanding both heart and mind, engaged pedagogy makes us better learners because it asks us to embrace and explore the practice of knowing together, to see intelligence as a resource that can strengthen our common good (2010, p. 22).

Embodied learning recognises students as whole beings with knowledge learnt in ordinary activities in and through love (hooks, 2010, p. 153). I have reasoned that slow wisdom is similar to hooks' engaged pedagogy through a shared emphasis on participation and embodied knowledge.

Baptists in this project suggest that discernment rests on the ability and willingness of the Church Meeting to hear unexpected contributions from members. Slow wisdom makes possible a shared and affective openness to different and new ideas that ultimately renew and transform the church just as engaged pedagogy can change a classroom. It also recognises the diversity of the body of Christ and her ability to encounter divine guidance in order to renew the church. Alongside Holmes (2012), I show the participation of all members to be a prophetic structure of the Meeting, but also that through the participation of unexpected members, new knowledge is discovered. I argue that participants use embodied knowledge in discernment to perceive these contributions as prophetic and as creating new knowledge that changes the tone of the Meeting and ultimately the outcome of discernment. hooks' emphasis

on participation in learning already exists within Baptist participation in discernment. Her engaged pedagogy reminds Baptists to celebrate embodied wisdom as a source of knowledge as well.

For Baptists, I argue that discernment is not based on scriptural images of dramatic revelation, nor do members perceive immediate and audible direction from God. Instead, this project shows that Baptist discernment offers a slow wisdom seen in the faithful schedule of meetings at regular intervals with particular patterns for difficult agenda items. The divine gut seen in the comfort of members is a valued indicator of embodied knowledge enabling slow wisdom to emerge as discernment. A prayerful atmosphere is critical to slow wisdom as it indicates a reliance on the Spirit, enables members to test and judge ideas in discernment and shows the covenantal care of members. Slow wisdom is a form of embodied Christian practical wisdom as such the experience of 'feeling comfort' or a 'sense of peace' is used by participants to describe how members know that discernment has been achieved. I argue that Baptists discern using this different epistemological source which recognises and validates the experience of all members in sensing discernment. Furthermore, I suggest that hooks' engaged pedagogy can encourage Baptists to embrace this form of embodied knowledge as being open to change and renewal and for the participation of all leading to new knowledge in our context of the Church Meeting.

5. *'Slow' wisdom: listening, bearing and consensus agreement*

This chapter demonstrates the remaining marks of slow wisdom as listening and hearing all members' contributions, small group work and unity through consensus agreement. Contrasts with the practice of slow wisdom are found in dialogue models employed in shared learning (hooks, 1994) and shared discernment (World Council of Churches, 2021). Dialogue is recognised as a significant parallel model as it enables attentive listening for participants. bell hooks (1994) believes the classroom is a radical place where dialogue-based learning is fostered. I argue that churches can host radical Church Meetings (Holmes, 2011) when slow wisdom alters the expected outcome of the Meeting fostering real change.

Listening to the body of Christ

Both listening to members and hearing distinctive voices speaking at the Church Meeting are identified by participants as part of the process of discernment for Baptists. Matthew is a White nearly retired minister, currently leading Jarman Baptist. Jarman is a bustling church with a medium-sized congregation, recently supplemented by new Christians from Iran moving into the area. As I sat in his manse study, my eye was drawn to his large collection of Celtic spirituality books, two desks busy with paper and various embroidered maps of areas of the UK where he had been in ministry in the past. On discernment, Matthew said:

I think the key to it is listening to each other and giving space to listening to God through one and other. Which means if you're going to do listening well, you've got to give it time and you've got to hear and then process that hearing. So, if you try to [do] something just in one meeting that just doesn't happen (Matthew).

Integral to discernment is then the time necessary to hear and process members' contributions over more than one Church Meeting. Listening is offered to one another as members and to and from God in prayer. Haymes et al (2008) recognise this trait of Church Meeting discernment as well, stating:

Faithfulness to Christ in church meetings shows itself in patient listening, with space for the dissenting voice, and willingness to go on waiting and praying when we are not sure where God is leading us (p. 52).

Faithfulness to Christ is seen by Haymes et al (2008) to mean a renewed appreciation of the church as the body of Christ, 'to recapture the understanding of what it is to be the church in this place with Christ as our head' (p. 53). Matthew develops this image of the body by

discussing the role of the members in listening to each other and God: 'I've tried to talk about the essence of a Church Meeting as being about the responsibility to listen rather than the right to speak'. The responsibility referred to here is to one another as members and to the belief that God might speak to any member of the congregation, all contributions, all members need each other in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.4-27). Likewise, Newman (2005) outlines that the corporate nature of the church should not be seen as an individual right but ought to be 'understood as a gift to the whole from God into which we grow' (p. 62). Listening to other members speak at a Church Meeting forms the wisdom Baptists use to discern to be slow. It is, however, slow listening that is a necessary expression of the ecclesiology of the Baptist church's understanding that members are the body of Christ.

Hearing into action

While recognising the value of listening within the Church Meeting, the contribution of this project is to note that the majority of participants spoke of the value of hearing other members speak at the Church Meeting to discern the mind of Christ. Two types of hearing are specified: a multitude of different voices and hearing a lone prophetic voice. Both are understood to guide discernment in new directions and offer an inclusive participatory decision-making practice. I argue that hearing as a physical attribute operates for participants as attentive listening to discern, for members do not simply hear the sound of another voice, the contribution of the voice to the Meeting changes the outcome. In this sense, slow wisdom is a doing discernment for Baptists to hear into action.

Coleman Baptist church had an historic issue regarding closing a playgroup that used the premises, which Fiona and the other deacons had discussed. The diaconate had brought a proposal to the Church Meeting and expected that their recommendation would be accepted. However:

We had a couple of voices, not people we were used to hearing from in a Church Meeting. We heard anger, passion. She was expressing how she felt, so that was important, but it did turn the Meeting. If it hadn't had been for that one or two people, things might have glided through.

Likewise, Hedger Baptist facing a financial challenge was looking for guidance from God when Nell shared: 'It might be what someone else says at the church, that's why I think it is important to hear everyone' (Nell). To make a decision, Baptists discern by hearing and listening to dissenting and different voices.

Nell Morton (1985) writes concerning a feminist imagining of a feminist perception of the universe which 'demands a new way of hearing that awakens speech and a new way of seeing' (p. 125). She observes small groups of women sharing painful stories which gave way to silence. Morton concludes that women are 'heard into speech' (1985, p. 127) whereby a 'hearing engaged by the whole body evokes speech, a new speech, a new creation' (Ibid). Hearing in this embodied manner is an act of empowerment which 'breaks through political and social structures to be heard by the disinherited' (p. 128). Morton's hearing is grounded in both God who listens to humanity and the biblical story of Pentecost (Acts 2.1-4), where the wind of the Spirit is heard first, fills each of the disciples and then each is heard speaking in different languages. As Elaine Graham suggests, Morton views hearing into speech as 'giving birth to a new language of liberation' (2007, p. 1). Baptists value hearing different voices in discernment. Baptists listen carefully to emotion and the lone voice, listening in this way turns the Meeting from an expected outcome to an outcome believed to be the mind of Christ.

Using small groups

Listening to each other and hearing other members lead to the mode of slow wisdom: small groups. Participant churches used small groups to discern together in only two examples, first solving an historic conflict over mulled wine at Coleman and secondly setting a strategy for pastoral care at Gates. For some time, Haymes et al (2008) have called for new practices at the Church Meeting 'which give content to our language of discerning the mind of Christ together, so that shared discussion really happens about issues that matter' (p. 91). This project seeks to give content to this hope by offering to every Baptist Church practical yet profoundly Baptist theological method for assuring Baptist identity as a gathered church to continue and to thrive. In sum, I argue that Baptist Church Meetings should use group work with a code of conduct for participants for critical discernment matters. Neither of these ideas are extraordinary in themselves, however from observation, they are not regularly employed in Church Meetings. Yet when each approach is embraced, a greater level of unity is generated which increases attendance and slow wisdom is more easily achieved.

The small group work examples were provided by participants at interview, none were observed. Both use discussion for a strategic agenda item. Small group work is identified as a core component of a good Church Meeting by Daniel because it fosters multi-voiced participation and prayer. Fiona expands the category by noting the shift in the power of members' voices and the role that a code of conduct played so that all members might

contribute. I argue that these examples contribute evidence that the Church Meeting can be a radical place of change, a liberating place where unusual voices redirect discernment in the process of slow wisdom.

Pastoral Care at Gates

Daniel is a middle-aged Black deacon at Gates who is deeply committed to the church, demonstrated by his continued support of the church although now he lives some distance from Gates. He is an ATM systems engineer, he told me that he was originally from Cameroon and added from 'the English-speaking part'. On a hot summer evening, I gratefully received fruit juice and a snack of cashew nuts. With the England football team playing in a semi-final that evening, our interview was punctuated with raucous cheers from neighbouring houses. When I asked Daniel what would make for a good Church Meeting, he cited an experience of discussing pastoral care:

Daniel: What I think would make a good Church Meeting, I think, is like a meeting we had where we put people into groups of 4,5,6 and be able to get almost everyone's views.

-Ruth: Yeah-

To give their opinion, to talk in a small group because if I'm writing down the point, you also want to contribute.

-Ruth: of course-

'What do you think we can do?' and then we ask in that quiet mood. People will talk. There was one that we did on pastoral care that one was beautiful. So many contributions. So when we break people up in groups like that and get almost everyone's view and then we pray together. So that is, that's what I think that question on discernment will come in. We are discerning the mind of Christ on that particular point we're looking at. And then before the chairman will gather all the points and let all of us pray again on it.

Daniel identified a good meeting to be one where opinions are written down and recognised as important which encourages others to contribute. He names the discernment process to be 'beautiful' because it had so many 'contributions' and a shared process of prayer. The small group format through recognizing contributions hears into speech and generates strategic action from members. Daniel's use of the word beautiful struck me as unusual. Where I might have expected a participant to name a process as 'good' or 'powerful' or 'useful', he chose 'beautiful'. By this description of a format change, he highlighted to me that this was not just a prosaic function change that helped to write a policy, although that was achieved at both Gates and Coleman. Daniel recognises the importance and symbolism of multi-voiced participation and identifies goodness and beauty in it indicating that the mind of Christ had been discerned.

Mulled wine and the carol service at Coleman

There had been a long-running contentious issue at Coleman Baptist Church: whether to have mulled wine at the annual carol service. Fiona recalled:

Fiona: Now this item had gone past various Church Meetings for years and years.

Ruth: I can imagine.

Fiona: And nothing had ever come of it, it had sort of got parked every single time. So, either we're gonna park it for good, or we're gonna have a proper discussion. And again, what had happened before was that there were a few loud voices.

-I: ahm-

So, our student minister ... basically put everybody in small groups and he did the business with the stone, or book or whatever it was. And everybody has a minute with that thing in their hand and passes it around the circle, so there were little circles going on around the church. So, everybody had a chance to say something, and he set down ground rules about no interruptions, nobody to take over, nobody to question, everybody had their say. It was fascinating. Some groups it worked, others you had the usual people trying to take over. But at the end of it, we got a policy on alcohol.

Ruth: And what was the result?

Fiona: The result was that we will allow alcohol on the premises under certain circumstances

...

Fiona: And at carol services we can offer mulled wine.

Ruth: Praise the Lord. [Both laugh] It's about the only Baptist church you can do it in, I think?!

There is a strong history of temperance support among Baptists and other non-conformist churches, which means that it is still typical that Baptist churches do not have alcohol on the premises; communion is shared with non-alcoholic wine or fruit juice. As Brian Harrison (1994) records:

In 1860 Dawson Burns estimated that a sixth of the 1,400 Baptist ministers in Britain were abstainers, and that another third were sympathizers. In 1862 about half the intake of dissenting theological colleges had become teetotal. In all the denominations, the men of the future were by now becoming teetotallers ... John Clifford and C H Spurgeon among the Baptists (p. 169).

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a teetotaller and promoted temperance, he was also, as Roger Hayden (2005) notes, the Baptist minister who 'dominated nineteenth-century Baptist life like a Colossus' (p. 46) who preached to 5000 people weekly at Metropolitan Tabernacle and was a philanthropist founding an orphanage, ministerial training college and planting churches (Hayden, 2005, p. 144-153), one of which was Coleman Baptist church in 1867.²⁴ Therefore it is normative for Coleman to not permit alcohol on their premises. Whether it is a formal rule or an informal rule, the use of alcohol in Baptist churches is acknowledged to be

²⁴ Coleman Baptist Church website, accessed 27/03/2023.

something of a touch-paper issue among members. Nonetheless, with the rise in popularity of carol services in the UK (Walker, 2015, p.112), it did not surprise me that Coleman Baptist attempted to discuss mulled wine at a Church Meeting. Fiona's account highlights a long-running narrative of disagreement regarding mulled wine. A lack of decision is noted 'It got parked every single time' and a 'few loud voices' dominated. It took the courage of a student minister to approach the discernment task ahead from a different perspective. He chose an unfamiliar model for discussion, he set rules of conduct, and he enabled everyone to speak. Discernment was enabled by small group work. Critically Fiona identifies that this structure weakened the impact of loud voices and allowed more members to speak. Changing the format of the Church Meeting altered the previous balance of power among members and forged a broader sense of discernment which moved the meeting from individual opinion to broad consensus by agreement.

Both Gates and Coleman Baptist Churches chose to change the discernment format when a strategic item came to the agenda or when a matter was identified by the leadership as needing discernment. Each church chose a less traditional format so that it might enable everyone to speak. Likewise, Angela Reed (2011) argues that congregational governance-led churches 'require structure for discernment' (p. 168). Small group work offers a flexible structure to the Church Meeting as an inclusive and participatory practice for discernment. The addition of a code of conduct aided different voices to be heard and disrupted the power balance of typical speakers at the Church Meeting. The model may be particularly pertinent to Gates and Coleman as the larger two churches in the sample but is also indicative of a need for creativity and fresh thinking to approach discernment in the Church Meeting more broadly.

As embodied Christian practical wisdom, Baptists use slow wisdom with prayer, sensing comfort and prophetic voices to discern the mind of Christ. However, this project argues that it is necessary to hear and recognise discomfort among members in discernment through listening, seeking consensus agreement and small group work. This balance is required to be inclusive of differences among members, to ensure multi-voiced participation and to maintain unity in the body of Christ.

Dialogue in the World Council of Churches and slow wisdom

The World Council of Churches (WCC) identifies a similar approach to slow wisdom in collective discernment which it defines as listening to the conscience of the church using

dialogue to generate unity. While the emphasis of slow wisdom is discernment through listening in a local context and expecting the prophetic to be heard afresh from lay church members, the WCC draws on a broader range of forms of scripture, culture and church tradition to discern. There are, however, similarities which connect the two practices: boundaried time frames for discernment, the aim of participation of all members and a shared value in seeking unity through building consensus with the Baptists and using dialogue from WCC.

Faith and Order paper no 235 (2021) states that:

Churches, as communities, have a collective desire to pursue God's will in a given situation; the communities draw on collective knowledge and wisdom to develop and apply relevant criteria to the issue; these communities reach a collective judgment in light of these criteria and reasoning; and the communities act upon these judgments together. These included not only the guidance of the Holy Spirit, scripture and tradition, but also teaching and decision-making authority, spirituality and church culture. The lived experience of individuals and groups directly involved in particular moral issues is a critical part of the process of moral discernment (p. 12-13).

Christian communities within the WCC recognise the varied influences on pursuing God's will in a broader context of ecumenical dialogue. A large section of the paper contains pictorial images similar to flow charts for discerning or pursuing God as churches, however, the paper argues that the model does not propose a method rather it alerts churches to what is at stake when discerning together:

Drawing attention to all the relevant elements and how they reflect various faith commitments may help dialogue partners to at least acknowledge the possibility of different reasoning processes on moral issues so that they are able to remain committed to the quest for visible unity (2021, p. 47).

Fostering dialogue between partners expands the slow wisdom approach of listening to each other and highlights the responsibility to accept differences within the church and a commitment to learn from them in the pursuit of unity. A good example of this was seen at Coleman Baptist regarding the consumption of alcohol at carol services. In the World Council model, we see Coleman Baptist recognising 'that they may be more than one morally acceptable ground and norm' and 'what was once thought unacceptable in all circumstances is now seen as morally acceptable in some new circumstances for the same reason as the previous prohibition' (World Council, 2021, p. 46). Through listening to others, Coleman Baptist reversed previous decisions regarding alcohol to be more effective in its mission and attract

more people to attend carol services. While slow wisdom highlights the importance of listening, it is enhanced by exploring how listening can be a form of dialogue, particularly in the use of small group work to bring change to existing problems faced by the local church.

A radical place: the classroom and the Church Meeting

Slow wisdom creates a radical and liberating Church Meeting. Similarly, hooks' work on education, argues that with dialogue the classroom becomes a radical space for learners and teachers. The classroom provides a site of possibility that hooks reshapes with the aim of liberation for all:

The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy. For years it has been a place where education has been undermined by teachers and students alike who seek to use it as a platform for opportunistic concerns rather than a place to learn (1994, p. 12).

In hooks' analysis, the classroom has been used as a tool to reinforce gender, racial bias and colonization of the mind in the USA (1994, p. 24-29). Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, hooks aligns herself with his argument that 'education as a practice of freedom must attempt to expand the capacities necessary for human agency and hence the possibilities for democracy itself' (Giroux on Freire, 2021, p. 7). While hooks acknowledges that: 'despite much that is dated in his discourses of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire continues to serve as a guide for our progressive efforts to redefine education as the practice of freedom' (p. 38). Inspired by Freire, hooks seeks to break with the education tradition of the 'banking model' (Freire, 1970, p. 45) and argues for an engaged pedagogy: 'We break with the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic and competitive. By choosing and fostering dialogue, we engage mutually in a learning partnership' (hooks, 1994, p. 43). The classroom is reformed by hooks' approach to creating learning opportunities that are characterised by sharing in knowledge generation, engaged students who are fully participating through listening and taking part in dialogue-based learning together.

However, critics of hooks' approach question both her use of Freire's critical pedagogy and argue that hooks' engaged pedagogy is not radical enough. hooks' use of Freire leads Jaramillo and McLaren (2009) to find her work 'wanting' (p. 30) as they argue she lacks focus on class or group consciousness found in Freire's work. Jaramillo and McLaren's analysis is that hooks has a 'tendency to conflate individual objective locations in the intersection of structures of inequality with individual subjects understanding of how they are situated based on their

experience' (2009, p. 29). However, other Black feminist writers argue, alongside hooks, that the recognition of the fragmented experience of Black women is one of 'simultaneous oppression of patriarchy, class and 'race'' (Carby, 1997, p. 46 and Wisneski, 2013). Remy Low (2023) argues that hooks' recognition of multiple sources of oppression is a 'necessary corrective to critical pedagogy's historic failure to address adequately the question of race' (p. 88). hooks' contribution of an engaged pedagogy honours the complexity of life and seeks to liberate students and teachers from the multiple axes at which oppression can intersect within the classroom. Similarly, slow wisdom recognises multiple issues affecting members' participation in discernment especially for marginalised members (Chapters 6 and 7).

Helen Mirza (1997) argues that hooks' model renewing existing education through engaged pedagogy is not radical enough. Instead, Mirza highlights the subversive pedagogy offered by supplementary schools. Mirza argues that change in education needs to be more than oppositional, instead through supplementary schools where 'an alternative world with different meanings and shared ways of knowing' (1997, p. 273) is provided by (predominantly) Black women. 600 supplementary schools provided by Black adults for Black children in the UK are shown by Mirza (1997, pp. 269-272) to offer 'a place of refusal and difference' (Ibid, p. 273) by teaching Black history, using Black role models and formal education in reading, writing and mathematics. Mirza (1997) argues that a radical place of possibility is found by:

[Supplementary schools] operating within, between, under and alongside the mainstream education and labour market structures subverting, renaming and reclaiming oppression for their children through their transforming pedagogy of 'raising the race' (p. 274).

Mirza's argument contrasts with hooks' approach of renewal from within pre-existing systems of education and her attempts at reclaiming the classroom. Yancy (2009) a Black university professor in the USA leading a course on film and 'race', Yancy identifies that hooks' engaged pedagogy involves 'labouring for freedom' (p. 34) and intensely difficult encounters but yet yields a 'non-compartmental approach to thinking and doing by creating an organic link between reflection, everyday life practices and habituated modes of being' (p. 46). Mirza identifies the importance of subversive and supplementary pedagogies while Yancy and hooks' delight in the renewal of minds by offering an engaged pedagogy attempt to bring radical change.

Similar suggestions of subverting the Church Meeting can be found in Ernie Whalley's (2014) call for the Church Meeting to be 'scrapped'. Moreover, in some sample churches, supplementary meetings were created to discern together, for example 'the finance squad' at Coleman undertook in-depth financial analysis outside of the Church Meeting (see Chapter 7). While Mirza argues for subversive and separate pedagogy to be the most radical solution, hooks' argument for the renewal of the classroom from within the education system seems the most sustainable. While recognising multiple issues regarding participation at the Church Meeting in Chapters 6 and 7, this project aims to help Baptists critically engage with the practice of discernment as members together and to renew practice rather than create parallel Church Meetings.

A renewed practice of discernment can be subversive and transformational as argued by Holmes (2011), or in hooks' (1994) terminology the Church Meeting could be a site of possibility. The benefit of small group work gives a practical model showing how renewed Church Meetings could change. Holmes argues that (2011) Church Meeting offers a radical model of transformation as it is:

Profoundly subversive of almost every human social order ... This is the church, where every social division is levelled and each person granted the dignity of one made in the image of God and remade through the sacrifice of Christ and the work of the Spirit (2011, p. 185).

I propose that a Church Meeting can subvert power structures to hear and explore differences of opinion, theology and expression from members with small group work. Holmes states this approach affirms the dignity of members as created in the image of God. The project data indicates that members are empowered through listening to each other and being heard at the Church Meeting. The process identified by this project of slow wisdom recognises that listening in such ways takes time, but this slowness helps the discernment process. Daniel at Gates shared an example of good practice that welcomed differences and actively sought a multi-voiced approach through group work. Small group work offers a way of listening to others that helps Baptists to critically discern the mind of Christ as a form of slow wisdom. The best practice of slow wisdom echoes the communal nature of learning through dialogue through listening to other members in discernment and seeking the mind of Christ together as the gathered church. I argue that the Church Meeting offers a radical possibility for members to listen to each other, encounter prophetic voices and uphold the value of each member as part of the body of Christ.

Consensus

Slow wisdom seeks a form of consensus as a mark of discernment. Across the four participant churches in this study, consensus is referred to as an expression of agreement that was actively sought and tested for at Gates Baptist, while Jarman and Hedger looked for agreement on decisions more generally. Another mode of consensus was found in the practice of small group work at Gates and Coleman Baptist. The project data gathered suggests that historic conflict and a desire for greater participation of members at the Church Meeting has led Baptist discernment practice away from majority rule voting towards generating unity among members by using small group work, sensing agreement and ‘testing the room’ all of which was expressed by participants as a form of consensus. It is believed that voting is divisive and a potential generator of conflict, therefore consensus as agreement is sought to limit opportunities to vote. Consensus is sought in both modes as above to avoid conflict which had damaged all participant churches in the past. While seeking consensus is recommended within new charitable law for Baptist churches, the model of consensus is not specified. A lack of a shared understanding of the meaning of consensus for Baptist churches leaves discernment practice open to dissensus. Slow wisdom identifies seeking consensus within a suite of elements of discernment to test an idea among members. Participants connect seeking consensus in this manner as embodied Christian practical wisdom. I show that Coleman and Gates use small group ‘Consensus Decision Making’ (Eichler, 2007) models to refine an idea to forward for a majority vote resolution. This second model connects discernment practice and belief in the priesthood of all believers and gives greater opportunity for unexpected voices to participate in discernment.

Defining consensus for Baptists

Consensus is named by participants to be part of discerning the mind of Christ. The two modes of consensus explored by this project also correlate to uses of consensus in broader organisational, religious, and political settings alongside changes in charity law for Baptist churches. The term consensus is used to refer to multiple models of shared decision-making in different contexts ranging from a sense of general agreement to particular models of consensus that seek total unanimity or permit members to veto, stand aside or use a combination of consensus and majority rule voting. Cruikshank and Susskind (2006) state that consensus is not about unanimity within organisations but concerns ‘solidarity and broad agreement made by informed participants’ (p. 11). In their practical guide to leading meetings, Cruikshank and Susskind offer strategies for building consensus agreement in organisations to

include facilitated small group work and investment of time to achieve overwhelming agreement (2006, p. 22 and p. 157). Meanwhile, in the comparable congregational setting of Quakerism, Sheeran argues that the Society of Friends veer away from the use of consensus meaning the overwhelming majority agree and seek unity instead even if friends stand aside due to individual dissent (1985, p. 63). Furthermore, Jane Mansbridge (2003) reflecting on consensus following political conflict in Northern Ireland, shows that consensus can be:

Highly individualistic and self-protective as well as highly communal. It can reflect a conviction of absolute autonomy in the refusal to be bound by any decision to which one has not personally consented. It can also reflect a conviction of absolute unity, in the expectation that God will speak through the conclusion of it all' (p. 230).

Mansbridge (2003) outlines a positive element of consensus as that it can be a participatory process but highlights that the cost is the possible self-protective nature of consensus. In so much as consensus can mean maintaining the status quo for better or worse. Consensus is a broad concept with specific meanings in particular settings.

For Baptists, there is a necessity to understand what consensus means in our context. It is especially important in light of new legislation for Baptist churches. In 2008 charity registration began for churches with an income of over £100,000 per annum and those with under £100,000 were either to become a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) or a registered charity in their own right by 2031²⁵. Under this new legislation, a standard pre-approved governing document sets out the role of the Church Meeting:

13 VOTING

13.1 Members shall, so far as possible, seek consensus on all matters considered at a Church Members' Meeting.

13.2 For matters requiring a decision a vote shall be taken and the outcome of the vote recorded as the resolution of the Members.

13.7 Except for the Appointment of Charity Trustees referred to in clause 15.12 a resolution at an Ordinary Church Members' Meeting shall be carried if supported by a majority of the Members present, entitled to vote and voting.²⁷

²⁷This wording means that an abstention is a decision not to vote, and therefore it is not counted as a vote against the proposal.

The alternative pattern of a resolution being carried by a decision of those members present and entitled to vote has not been offered. The Charity Commission has indicated that

²⁵ 'The Charities (Exception from Registration) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 have extended the exception for a further ten years, until 31 March 2031' (CO6 Churches and Charity Registration, Baptist Union, 2021, p. 2).

experience in case work and decisions taken in various court cases make the creation of this kind of arrangement unacceptable. Uncertainty would be created around the question of the significance and interpretation of an abstention.

Therefore, within the standard CIO agreement for Baptist churches is a rule (13.1) to seek consensus and to vote to decide on a resolution. The practice of seeking agreement as consensus is now acknowledged for Baptist churches, akin to generating agreement as Cruikshank and Susskind (2006). A second mode is identified as a consensus but is the use of small groups to increase participation (Mansbridge, 2003) and to refine resolutions (Eichler, 2007) with the primary aim of reducing conflict through voting. The quest for unity in the Church Meeting is expressed again in terms of seeking consensus.

Examples of consensus as seeking agreement

Stephen is a larger-than-life Baptist minister. We met at Gates church in his comfortable study lined with hundreds of books and decorated with orange and black modernist style paintings. He is a highly experienced and well-regarded Black minister from Trinidad. As senior minister of the thriving Gates Baptist Church, he yearns for greater participation at Church Meetings. Stephen told me he knew about the historical issues of conflict at Gates and had set out to create a new atmosphere in the Church Meeting:

I try to make sure I get a sense of the weight of it, if others are agreeing with it even though they're not saying anything. I think people who are not saying anything are contributing their very presence, they know what it's about, they know it's a members' meeting, they know it's about drawing near the heart and mind of Christ. We say it at the start of every meeting, etc. So, they are very present. We've eaten together, ah we're in this together. Some people are more vociferous than others, that's why we break up into little buzz groups to try to get more voices etc. ... I think by trying ... to make sure I have some kind of consensus.

As discussed in chapter 4, Baptists use embodied practical wisdom formed by a common divine gut and bodily participation in the Church Meeting as part of process of discernment. This category of Baptist embodied practical wisdom is expanded by Stephen as 'sensing the weight' of a matter. He acknowledges the bodily presence of members and roots members in their responsibility by highlighting a shared practice of eating and discerning together. He fosters participation through small group work and so finds 'some kind of consensus'. Before Stephen came to the church, Maureen said:

There would be pressure on people to, y'know, they'd put pressure on themselves because they didn't want to seem to be different or be seen to be the one who didn't agree with that because after the Church Meeting someone would be bound to speak to you and ask you why you didn't agree, because it's happened to me. [laughs]. I'm talking about that in Stephen's

time because I don't think anything like that has really happened. And he would do it in a way that 'Do I get the general feel that everyone is for this, so can you give me a show of hands, so I know how you're thinking' which is a different way to saying, 'let's vote on this'.

Maureen found that the shift away from voting and towards generating an agreement led by the new minister Stephen was effective as it reduced pressure on members to vote according to other members' views.

In the model of slow wisdom, seeking consensus is understood firstly as a form of embodied knowledge used to indicate discernment for participants. It is reached by ensuring the full participation of members through small group work processes and or testing the room before voting. Consensus indication within a meeting at Gates Baptist disrupted historic practices of coercion in voting. Overall, consensus was identified by participants as a simple agreement between members and therefore seen as a marker of discerning the mind of Christ. Achieving consensus was viewed as part of an informal process later formalised by a members' vote.

Examples of consensus building techniques

However, the second mode of consensus identified in this project sits on organisational principles found in Consensus Decision Making (CDM) which offers an intentional practice of review and participation by group members. Mike Eichler (2007) outlines that CDM began in the USA in the 1960s and peaked in popularity in the 1980s with direct-action campaign groups such as anti-nuclear movements. Furthermore, in recent years, CDM has undergone a renaissance with Occupy using the model for decision-making in their general assemblies, which Darcy Leach (2016) explored by analysing a group of social movements in Germany. She argues that:

Consensus Decision Making affords those affected by a decision the right to participate in making it and to block any decision they see as harmful or immoral. When all goes well people feel included, yields well thought out decisions that are easier to implement and less likely to be challenged after the fact. Perhaps most importantly, consensus can build strong bonds of mutual trust and solidarity (Leach, 2016, p. 36).

It is these bonds of trust and the sense of inclusion that participant churches have sought to foster in the Church Meeting. Data from the participant churches showed that churches trying to make difficult decisions or those who had a history of conflict within the Church Meeting generated an iterative model of consensus decision-making using small group work. It is this form of consensus decision-making that depicts slow wisdom as it fully engages members in

discernment practice. While members participating does not imply consensus as Francesca Polletta argues (2005, p. 271-88), the project data shows that churches who encourage all members to participate in discussion are more likely to determine they have discerned the mind of Christ.

Peter Emerson (2016) sets out Consensus Decision Making in the following manner relating to the practice of the United Nations:

A draft resolution was given at a meeting. This is called option A. If any one of more countries disagree with any part of it, they may draft an alternative option which shall be called B. ... If at any time, other members of the council wish to propose yet another alternative option, then this they may do. Each resolution is then on the table for discussion.... Participants may declare a preference for options listed, this indicating possible grounds for compromise, indeed they may propose a composite ... If at the end of the day, that total number of options has come down to just one, this may be regarded as the verbal consensus. (Emerson, 2016, p. 5.2.1)

While Emerson outlines a more formal political process, the process of generating compromise and or a composite resolution can be seen in the role of small groups discerning together at Coleman Baptist. Fiona described the process of small group discernment:

There had been general feedback from each of the groups and as each of the group leaders were feeding back it was very obvious that the consensus of the people in the room was 'let's try it.' So, we did. And we would withdraw it if it wasn't working or went horribly wrong (Fiona).

Baptist churches in this project use consensus to mean seeking general agreement and use consensus building techniques of small groups refining resolutions to facilitate unity at the Church Meeting.²⁶ The processes chosen by churches that have experienced conflict seek these methods to increase participation in discernment. The practice of slow wisdom reflects both the influence of organisational techniques to build consensus from social organising groups and links to the historic theological belief in the priesthood of all believers. Slow wisdom recognises the value of both modes of consensus as important to discernment but demarcates seeking agreement as a form of consensus and small group work as a technique to primarily increase participation.

²⁶ See 'Open to God' (Baptist Union of Victoria, 2009, p. 52).

Slow wisdom is embodied Christian practical wisdom used by Baptists to discern together the mind of Christ. It is marked by slowness, prayer, prophetic voices, listening, small group work, dialogue and consensus agreement. I argue that Baptists should listen to one another because of the theological understanding that the gathered church is the body of Christ. Such listening enables members to hear the Spirit speak through members who do not regularly contribute and by hearing the emotions of members about agenda items. Listening is enabled by the use of small group work which I argue disrupts power structures. The contrasting example of dialogue in the World Council of Churches (2021) is shown to generate consensus. Baptist churches use consensus to mean a general agreement and as a specific agreement which is tested in the Meeting. The advantage of dialogue is to reach consensus by agreement more easily. hooks' (1994) promotes dialogue in the classroom as a radical step to open learning to change, while Mirza (1997) argues for learning to be subverted in separate provision. Slow wisdom articulates a Baptist practice of discernment that can change the Church Meeting through slow prayerful listening to each other leading to genuine dialogue and consensus agreement.

However, this project shows that the Church Meeting will fail to be radical unless all members are present and participating in slow wisdom. The low attendance of younger members, members from other denominations and Black and Brown members limit the possibility of the Church Meeting. In the following chapters, I argue for the inclusion of all members through changed practical arrangements, sharing discernment practice and recognising privilege as necessary to renew the Church Meeting as a radical place.

6. *'One leg in, one leg out': younger members and members from other denominations*

Toyin is a Black middle-aged Deacon at Hedger Baptist; she works in IT management. Our interview was held in her modern wooden feather-boarded home on a quiet cul-de-sac close to the church. I was given a coffee in an Arsenal football club mug; she's a huge fan. Her observation on attendance at Church Meetings noted:

Some people still have one leg in and one leg out. We have people who will come unfailingly every Sunday but won't come to Church Meeting.

Interviewees suggested that members who 'have one leg in and one leg out' can be grouped into two categories: young people and members who have transferred from a different denomination. This chapter explores why lower attendance is noted for these two groups and how this can be increased. For young people, the project data reveals practical approaches taken by sample churches to encourage young members to participate in the Church Meeting. I argue that providing childcare and hosting the Meeting on Sundays after church supports younger members to attend. I contrast participants' perceptions on younger members' affiliation to church with literature provided by Brierley (2017) and Gill (2002) who suggest that while overall church attendance has decreased, young people hold faith as core to their identity (Perrin, 2016, Hopkins, 2022). The second category of members discussed by interview participants are members from other denominations. Literature on denominational switching from the USA by Davignon (2012) and from the UK by Guest, Aune, Sharma and Warner (2013) shows denominational adherence is stronger in the USA. I propose that sharing the model of slow wisdom will foster inclusion at the Church Meeting. I have argued that Baptists offer a model of slow wisdom where critical listening to others is fundamental to discernment. If young members and members from different denominations are not present, Baptists will find difficulty in fully discerning the mind of Christ. All excluded members have a gift to offer the Church Meeting for their presence is: 'as *Christ* to manifest himself in the world, to make himself knowable and tangible through all his members' (Fiddes, 2006, p. 67). This chapter analyses these excluded groups and suggests changes to make the Church Meeting a welcoming place.

Absent younger members at the Church Meeting

Barbara, Colin, Fiona, Maureen and Toyin suggested that younger members were present at church services but typically absent from the Church Meeting. I argue from Gates Baptist that

younger members will attend if the meeting is held on a Sunday and childcare is provided. Interviewees attributed this absence to the following reasons neatly surmised by Colin: 'They haven't got the time and don't want the responsibility'. Fiona, Maureen and Toyin felt this was due to the changing work patterns of younger people. Maureen said:

When I joined people used to come, but people now you know have work in the evenings, in the afternoons, have children, don't want to come, so people stopped coming. It's just a whole different life now.

From Coleman Baptist, the largest church in the sample set, Fiona shared her view of the impact of absent younger members at the Church Meeting:

I would just love to have somewhere where our youth, our students, young folks, people with families right in there, visibly helping to discern what Christ's will is for our church. And the problem I have with Church Meetings at the moment is that I'm not convinced of that because they are not there ... That's the difficulty, we are discerning the mind of Christ trying to reflect what we think they would want, rather than us all being together at the same time in the same room, which is a shame.

Each interviewee recognised a decrease in attendance of younger members and attributed this to the choice of members and lifestyle changes. Fiona is not convinced of discernment outcomes at the Church Meeting because absent younger members lead to a fractured discernment experience where only the perspective of older members can be heard.

Determining the age of younger members

Interviewees were not precise in determining the age of younger members. However, from observing the sample churches, attending members were typically over 40 years old. Membership is offered to a person in the following way: 'Baptism by immersion upon personal profession of faith is the normal mode of entry into the membership of a Baptist church' (BUGB, 2008, clause 7.1). An alternative route is for Baptist churches with open membership who will accept:

Persons seeking membership who have not been baptised in the manner described in the Union's Declaration of Principle may at the discretion of the Church Members' Meeting be accepted for full membership based on their own public profession of faith' (Ibid, 2008, clause 7.2).

The only mention of age in BUGB *Approved Governing Document* is: 'Although Members of any age may attend and participate in a Church Members' Meeting the minimum age for voting will be determined by the Church Members' Meeting' (Ibid, clause 13.11). A member is either baptised within the church and becomes a member at the age determined locally for baptism

or becomes a member at a later date: ‘A person wishing to become a Church Member shall apply in a manner determined by the Church Members’ Meeting’ (Ibid, clause 7.4). Therefore, the minimum age of a younger member is determined by local church practice. In my experience, I was baptised as a teenager aged 14 and began attending the Church Meeting at age 18. For this thesis, from my fieldwork observation and personal experience, I suggest that the interviewees referring to younger members are referring to a relatively wide age bracket of members aged approximately 18-40 years old.

Research regarding young people’s church attendance

This project shows that young members are present in Baptist churches but not fully engaged in the Church Meeting. Colin was the only person to mention research related to young people’s attendance at church, he said: ‘Scripture Union is saying that 95% of youngsters don’t have contact with a church’. ‘The 95 Campaign’ (Scripture Union, 2016) recognises the shift in attendance of young people at church and provides a range of resources for churches to make changes within their context. Peter Brierley’s (2017) research into church attendance was used by Scripture Union for their campaign. Brierley states: ‘In 2017 in England, there are about 380,000 people aged 16 to 34 attending Sunday church services ... The overall average in 2017 is 5.2%’ (2017, p. 2). However, he also notes that ‘London attracts a high percentage of worshippers partly because 18% of London’s population is in their 20s (against 11% in Britain as a whole), and also because London has many immigrants, a large proportion of whom are in this age group (Ibid, p. 3)²⁷. The average attendance recorded by Brierley (2017) for a London church of those aged between 20-29 was 17 young people per church. Nonetheless, the number of young people in the UK church is comparable to the general decline in UK church attendance:

UK Church membership has declined from 10.6 million in 1930 to 5.5 million in 2010, or as a percentage of the population; from about 30% to 11.2%. By 2013, this had declined further to 5.4 million (10.3%) (Brierley, 2011, p. 2).

As a further comparison, Robin Gill (2002) uses the example of Bromley churches which were included in a 1903 study of church attendance²⁸ across all denominations where in 1903 he notes ‘31% of the Bromley population were in church but only 10.5% by 1993’ (p. 76). In terms of attending church, both Brierley (2017) and Gill (2002) show overall UK church

²⁷ Immigration is identified as contributing to the growth of some London churches in comparison to churches outside the capital. See Gill (2002) Chapter 3.

²⁸ Gill uses Richard Mudie-Smith (ed). (1904). *The Religious Life of London*. London, UK: Hodder.

attendance in decline, but Brierley shows younger people are more likely to attend church in London where all the sample churches in this research are based. The qualitative data gathered from this project aligns with Brierley's (2017) statistics in that young people are present in London churches and become members. However, participants suggest that younger members (18-40 years) are not engaging fully in the Church Meeting discernment process.

Best practice: Moving the Church Meeting

A response to low attendance from younger members at the Church Meeting from a sample church was to simply change the time of the meeting from a mid-week evening meeting to after church on a Sunday. This common-sense approach attaches the Church Meeting to the service which the younger members are already attending. Each church wanted to increase the number of members at the Meeting and met with a variety of success in terms of increasing attendance among younger members. Trinity and Gates held Church Meetings only on Sundays to attract younger members. In contrast, Hedger and Coleman held their Church Meetings on either weekdays or Sundays after the service. Fiona noted the improved attendance for young people on:

The Sunday lunchtime, or that kind of approach is possibly the way forward. We'd have to mix it in with some Thursday evenings, but you do get a very different group when you do it on a Sunday.

Fiona hints at a standard practice of midweek meetings attended by regular and historic members of the congregation as being necessary and Sundays offering a group that is very 'different'.

At the fieldwork stage of this research, I saw that the only Church Meeting that had children present and multiple members under 40 present was Gates Baptist Church. Gates Baptist Church held its Church Meeting on a Sunday after a shared meal with a crèche provided as a deliberate act to counter previous issues of conflict at the church. Minister Stephen said:

I think it's been a success. I think we've come a long way. I think there is a good tone, a good atmosphere, they sense that we're doing something, that vision is being imparted. Here's the important thing: it being church. They feel like we are being a church. They feel like I'm being a minister who is not saying 'Here is all the answers', even with my strong leadership style, I'm saying 'Yes I have answers, but what do you think?' ... They feel it's about them and not about us.

While Stephen set out to reduce conflict, I observed more young people than at any other sample church, so I suggest that an additional benefit is that the Church Meeting has now become a welcoming place for young people and families.

Sample churches moved the Church Meeting to Sundays to attract younger members attendance. I argue this is an important step to hear the Spirit speak fully as ‘each one blessed and grace by the Spirit with some good gift for the good of all’ (Haymes et al, 2008, p. 51). A modified format for a Church Meeting results in a different group discerning together. Changing the practice of when the Meeting is held can disrupt pre-existing power structures as seen at Gates and renew the church.

Research regarding young people’s engagement with Christianity

In contrast to the interviewees’ perception that younger members ‘haven’t got the time and don’t want the responsibility’ to be engaged with the Church Meeting, research provided by Ruth Perrin (2016) argues that young people are actively engaging in Christian faith and Linda Hopkins (2022) demonstrates that engagement can be improved through dialogue. Ruth Perrin’s (2016) qualitative study into the faith lives of young people (in the UK, aged 18-33) within the evangelical church argues that although fewer young people have a Christian faith:

For the minority who have it, Christian faith appears to be more important in their self-identification than it was in previous generations. However, experience and internal authority are more important than external religious structures and key priorities are the authenticity of religious communities and the pursuit of justice (Perrin, 2016, p. 14).

Similarly, Kati Niemelä (2015) argues that Finnish young people who leave the Lutheran church are not disappointed with the institution but prioritise living an ‘authentic life in which they follow their own true selves’ (p. 172). Perrins (2016) and Niemelä (2015) demonstrate that for young people to engage in church life it must be experienced as an authentic expression of faith.

Recent research into the role of young people in communion in the UK Baptist church suggests that one way to engage young people in church worship is to ensure their voices are heard. Hopkins (2022) states that within the Baptist church, there is ‘no set structure, system, or framework in Baptist practice for the nurture and teaching of children and young people’ (p. 217) which leads to churches using a traditional schooling or curriculum base for learning on Sundays. Instead, Hopkins argues for churches to ensure young people are given a

‘pedagogic voice [where] churches value the presence of young people within the worshipping community, consult with young people, encourage dialogue, and embrace active listening’ (p. 217). Hopkins aligns her argument to those provided by Baroutsis, McGregor and Mills (2016) who state the development of a student voice in education enables ‘community membership associated with the ownership of practices and decision-making related to the young people’s learning and improved engagement’ (p. 123). Hopkins’ ethnographic study argues that dialogue with young people in the church will improve a sense of belonging and therefore engagement with the congregation. This study identifies the presence of young people as members of sample churches, but in light of the research provided by Perrin (2016) and Hopkins (2022), suggests one way to enable young people to engage with the Church Meeting is to uncover an authentic expression of discernment or ‘what the life of faith looks like in practice’ (Collins-Mayo, Mayo, Nash, Cocksworth, 2006, p. 110). Slow wisdom is a model of discernment that honours dialogue among all members (see Chapter 5), I suggest that the sharing of slow wisdom will aid discernment as an authentic expression of faith for young people in Baptist churches.

Members from other denominations

As Maureen has been a member at Gates for several decades, she could chart the highs and lows of the Church Meeting through numerous pastoral ministries. She identified a change in attendance:

Maureen: We tend to have a lot of people who come to Baptist churches now who are members who are not from a Baptist ... [long pause]

Ruth: Tradition?

Maureen: Yeah, Baptist background.

Maureen: And this I notice now - I don’t think a lot of people understand the Baptist tradition. I think it’s very important.’

Maureen highlights two issues: members who are not from a Baptist background and she links historical denominational affiliation to valuing the Church Meeting tradition. Similarly, Nell at Hedger said: ‘a lot don’t come from a Baptist tradition, so they don’t see that the Church Meeting is important.’

The first pattern noticed by Maureen and Nell is typical of each of the sample churches in this project, as Desmond at Hedger Baptist highlights: ‘Our congregation is a mixture of folks, we’ve got Catholic, Anglican, strong Methodists, Pentecostal’. In the existing literature

regarding ‘denominational switching’ (Dougherty, Marti, and Martinez, 2015), surveys of university students’ denominational affiliation are used by Guest, Aune, Sharma and Warner (2013) in the UK and Davignon (2012) in the USA. While Guest et al argue that evangelical churches are the only group to retain and attract affiliation (2013, p. 91-92), and Davignon (2012) notes the opposite effect in the USA (2012, p. 271) both studies highlight ‘a shift in denominational market share’ (Guest et al, 2013, p.203). In terms of general adult denominational affiliation in the UK, Robin Gill (2002) offers the historic development of Bromley (Kent) churches as a case study:

There is considerable fluidity between house churches and the evangelical congregations of the Baptists and the Anglicans. So, although Bromley church going during this century is down by at least two-thirds, relative balances between denominations are still shifting (p. 77).

Each study highlights denominational shifts in patterns of attendance as seen in the sample churches of this project, which shows that the experience of multiple denominations present in one Baptist church is normative.

Stephen at Gates Baptist suggested his congregation were ‘less denominationally precious...because people just like the church, they like the music or whatever; “Oh you’re a Baptist church?”’. For this project, Davignon’s study is instructive as it shows factors measured in percentage of importance when students choose a church, which he identifies as: theology of pastor 42%, style of preaching 26%, style of worship 22%, college ministry programme 9%, other ministries 9% and denomination 9% (2016, p. 275). Davignon concludes: Evangelical protestants ... may be more likely to shop for a congregation based on the pastor’s preaching ability and the congregation's worship style (2016, p. 271). Likewise, Stephen argued that members’ preference in choosing a new church depended on multiple factors of which denomination was insignificant. As a qualitative research project, the data offers the observed experience of urban and suburban north London Baptist churches that suggests it is typical for Baptist churches to have multiple denominational backgrounds present among their members as denominational affiliation has reduced.

The second issue identified by Maureen and Nell is the effect of the presence of those from different denominations upon the role of the Church Meeting. To this effect, Desmond stated:

Certain people are more willing to come and receive than to contribute to the direction. Again, I feel it’s because of their background, they’re not used to that.

He suggests that those attending a Baptist church and having previously attended a non-congregational church will have experienced a different approach to governance and decision-making and are more likely to participate in a receptive role. Such members retain their previous denominational experience and do not value the Church Meeting in the same way as historic members. The presence of people from a different denominational heritage is seen as problematic by Maureen and Nell regarding the practice of the Church Meeting in terms of understanding the importance of attendance and its discernment role in the governance of the church.

As an analysis of discernment processes at the Baptist Church Meeting, the project identifies particular issues with the presence of other denominations in Baptist churches. Through the participants' terms of expression like Nell 'we just assume that they will just pick it up', I show that the impact of a rising presence of people from different denominations is that Baptist churches can no longer assume knowledge of the value and practice of the Church Meeting. Moreover, the effect is that historic members who do have implicit knowledge of how the Meeting works hold significant power and control at the Church Meeting. Members from different denominations do not hold the same knowledge regarding the importance of the Church Meeting as historic members hold. The presence of members from different denominations can result in a Church Meeting that is fractured in terms of expectations from all members, knowledge and power sharing. For younger members and members from other denominations, the active sharing of slow wisdom as a model of discernment would increase confidence to participate and offer knowledge of how and why Baptists seek to discern the mind of Christ.

7. *'Too Black': Racism and the Church Meeting*

In my interview with Desmond, he shared a story from his early days as the minister at Hedger Baptist. Desmond recounted a conversation held with the ex-treasurer as follows:

Desmond: He was concerned that the church was becoming too Black.

Ruth: Was he White?

Desmond: Yeah.

Desmond: I thought 'Oh where has this come from?' And I think it came out wrong.

Ruth: That's always gonna come out wrong! I mean there is no right way to say that, oh gosh!

Desmond: I think what he wanted to say, was that what he had noticed was that the White folks were either dying out or passing on or moving on to better areas outside the M25. And that the people coming in were more mixed. I think that's what he meant. I said to him: 'Look I have no control over who comes, or what colour they are.'

Desmond's account of a church being 'too Black' is an account of a church that has experienced change and the historic members failing to embrace difference at the Church Meeting. His story is not the only one, this project identified racism within the Church Meeting in different sample churches.

For this chapter, I have chosen to reflect on three areas: the social context of the participant churches, encountering Whiteness, and racism at Church Meetings by demonstrating the secondary cycle of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) on the project data. This approach offers a contextual reflection that recognises the complexity of the Church Meeting and seeks to make helpful changes to practice. Through a contrasting reflection on the environment of theological education, I show how Willie Jennings' (2020) *After Whiteness* provides a pattern for understanding racism at the Church Meeting. The practical suggestion of group work is just one way congregations can begin to address racism so that all members may participate in slow wisdom at the Church Meeting.

Social context: Demographic changes in London

Local demographic changes have important effects on the social context and experience of racism at the Church Meeting. Desmond's account outlines the changing social context and ethnicity of members at Hedger Baptist. All sample churches were White historically but had become multi-ethnic congregations in each of the participants' recent memory. I define a multi-ethnic church as a congregation 'comprising at least 20% of a secondary ethnic group (Gushiken, 2015, p. 17). The change from historically White to multi-ethnic churches is shown by David Wise's (2022) autoethnographic study at Greenford Baptist Church, London. He states that in 1987 with 93 members, 91% were White British, but by 2014 with 195 members,

33% were White British (2022, p. 206) with ‘people from more than forty-five different countries within the congregation and the worship, prayer, Bible teaching, leadership, in fact, every aspect of [Greenford Baptist] life drew on and reflected the many cultures/ethnicities represented in the church’ (Wise, 2022, p. 17). I suggest the growth of multi-ethnic churches reflects the consistently changing demographic of people living and working in London. For example, in my London borough²⁹ where the majority of the sample churches are located a noticeable decrease in the White population was identified in the 2011 census:

The White UK ethnic group is 40.5% which is a sharp fall from the 2001 level (for White British) of 61.2%. The White UK share is lower than in both London as a whole (44.9%) and well below the level in England (79.8%) (My London Council, 2012).³⁰

At Hedger Baptist, the church became a Black-majority church in an historically White denomination. Anthony Reddie states that there are two types of Black churches, Pentecostal or Black majority who are: ‘demographically determined, as their Black majority membership has grown out of Black migrants moving into inner-city urban contexts, coupled with the flight of the White middle class’ (2012, p. 237). Desmond suggests further explanations for a shifting demographic context: new stages in life and economic rationale. Likewise, Omar Khan (2019) identifies the effects of parenthood and gentrification as part of the reason for demographic change in London and other large cities. I suggest that the changing social context of Hedger Baptist contributed to Desmond’s experience of racism within his church.

The effect of social changes and demographic shifts in the local community of a church are noticeable in the sample church congregations. Each church recognised the changing ethnicities of its congregation and community but approached this change differently. Jarman had a mix of different ethnicities in the congregation and now has a large group of Iranians attending services but not Church Meetings. Gates had changed in terms of age and ethnicity from older White members to younger Black members who were all represented at the Church Meeting. Coleman still had a majority of older White middle-class attendance at Church Meetings but was also attracting large numbers of Black and Brown members to worship services. The ministers at Hedger and Gates are the first Black ministers to be appointed to the role in the history of each church. For this study, it is important to note demographic changes affecting the sample churches and now seek to understand the impact of the presence

²⁹ My London Council denotes the location of the research project and so is anonymised.

of Black and Brown members on the historically White congregation and their ability to discern together at the Church Meeting.

Encountering Whiteness

To understand Desmond's experience of racism, I explored my privilege of Whiteness. Robert Beckford states: 'Whiteness is more than just the epidermis, it is also about behavioural characteristics, social location and worldview' (Beckford, 2007, p. 100). My worldview as a White researcher was typified by Lorraine Dixon's observation that: 'Good White Christian folks often cannot believe how racism and other forms of oppression can limit the experience of many within the church' (2007, p. 126). Being White in an historically White church means that I can view all church practices, habits and beliefs held by my church as normal. Beginning with participation in worship, Tope Bello argues that: 'to look like an authentic Christian you must sing, worship, and act in a way that is Western' (2020, p. 46). Rev. Kate Coleman, who was the first Black female minister to be President of the Union, states that throughout her ministry training, 'the only valid theology presented was patriarchal and invariably Euro-American' (2007, p. 112). Therefore, wholesale structural change is required as Michelle Mahon (2015) writes:

There is a necessity for abandonment of the notion that 'Whiteness' is normative and central to Christian reality, yet this process of abandonment is not a simple task because the organisational structures within the world's major churches are inextricably bound up with Whiteness (p. 288).

From the arguments of these authors, Whiteness is normative in Baptist Union churches in the UK. As Bello, Coleman and Mahon suggest Whiteness is seen in the practice of worship, ministerial training and organisational structure. Back states that an acknowledgement of Whiteness 'must be coupled with a commitment to achieving social justice through understanding how racism functions and therefore how it can be dismantled' (2002, p. 58). I recognise that Whiteness is present not only within White researchers like me but also, I argue below, within the observed Church Meetings.

Racism and the Church Meeting: difference in expression

In multi-ethnic churches, the Church Meeting struggles to cope with racism seen in a lack of understanding or appreciation of different models of expression, tone of speech and behaviour as shown in the interview data examples below. Further, the difference in expression and tone of speech is a contributing factor to low levels of members willing to speak in Meetings and

overall low attendance at Church Meetings in comparison to Sunday services. A failure to listen is a barrier to seeking slow wisdom and discerning the mind of Christ.

Minister of Hedger Baptist, Desmond was born in Jamaica and arrived in the UK as a teenager. Although he has been in ministry in other denominations, Hedger is his first Baptist Church as a minister. He mentioned an example of the challenge to discernment where different terms of expression are used by Black, Nigerian and White British members at the Church Meeting:

Desmond: It's partly cultural, both in their different ways [*two Black Nigerian members*] are very forward and clear in the way they would express things. Maybe [*the White British secretary*] and I would be more diplomatic. We'd probably say the same thing but in a more diplomatic way and certainly, I think [*the White British secretary*] feel that there are certain things that are best not said. Whereas [*two Black Nigerian members*] would ...

Ruth: Just say it! [both laugh]

Here the natural forms of expression used by Black Nigerian members annoy the White British and Black Caribbean members and their behaviour is seen as not appropriate. Willie Jennings (2020) cites a similar view encountered by his student Maria:

Maria was raised conservative Baptist in Jamaica, in a Christian world where everything African was seen as primitive, backward and anti-Christian. But she knew better. She wanted her faith to speak to the majesty of her African past and African diaspora present (p. 36).

I argue that a similar experience is seen at Hedger, where Black African members' manner of expression was perceived as inappropriate. The frankness of expression that is not 'diplomatic' challenges the status quo of a Church Meeting. If a Church Meeting only hears a difference of expression and does not listen to the content of members' contributions, it risks failing to hear critical voices in the search for the mind of Christ.

In the observed meeting at Hedger, the Black female treasurer presented the financial report which revealed the church was drawing on their reserves monthly. She asked for help in analysing what steps the church could take. Toyin suggested a spending threshold for the reserve usage 'But at that meeting, I saw that nobody wanted to make that decision'. On reflection, Toyin felt like other members judged her contributions as: '“Toyin says the wrong thing.” Actually, I keep it real. You know. This is the hard truth'. Here Toyin and the treasurer are presenting a different view of what the church should be doing in comparison to the other

members in the Church Meeting. The direct approach of the Black African members is seen as different and unhelpful to the Black Caribbean minister and White secretary.

To analyse the experience of racism and the Church Meeting, this project used thematic and axial coding. Axial coding asks the researcher to consider what is the condition, context, action, and consequence of each code and if it links to other parts of the project data. Below I show the detail and connections generated by the method to unpack the matter of racism and the Church Meeting.

Sample axial coding

<i>Desmond (Transcript page 14, code 27)</i>	
Condition	Overall theme of difficulty in discernment.
Context	Different terms of expression used by Black and White members.
Action	The non-verbal result was a source of tension within the Meeting.
Consequence	'Puts people off coming'
Linked to other thematic codes	Racism, Speech, Power, Low Attendance

Once this first code has undergone the second cycle of axial coding, the researcher looks to 'saturate' the code with the remaining codes within the thematic category. Saturation occurs when a pattern of argument emerges and 'no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions or consequences are seen in the data' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 136).

Through axial coding methodology, I identify the connected themes of speech, power (that is judgment on appropriate behaviour) and racism. The code and description above show that terms of expression offered by Black Nigerian members are seen as 'different and very forward' in comparison to the Black Jamaican minister and the White British secretary who would 'probably say the same thing' but in a more 'diplomatic' manner. Certain types of expression are judged to be appropriate for the Church Meeting based on 'cultural' forms of speech. Therefore, data generated from the project suggests that in multi-ethnic churches, the Church Meeting encounters power struggles and racism which are seen in a lack of acceptance of different terms of expression or speech and, also theology to which I now turn.

Difference in theology

At both Hedger and Coleman Baptist, I show that those with different theologies to the dominant members or the majority of members present were marginalised. In both examples,

the ideas rejected by Church Meetings were presented by Black members. In both examples, a different theology to the White historic norm of the church was rejected as too different. At the observed Hedger Baptist meeting, the idea of a summer barbecue was discussed. Toyin said:

Some Black folk believe we give money throughout all the year, so if we're gonna have a barbecue then why can't we spend a lot on the barbecue? So, we can have a fantastic barbecue. Then Nell [White] may feel 'Let's cut our coats, let's spend less'.

Here is a split opinion on a seemingly straightforward matter; how much to spend on a barbecue. However, Toyin indicates a Black theological belief in the benefits of giving or tithing to the church and contrasts it to the White theological view of finance seen at Hedger. Threads of power are also seen in this example where a White view of church finance is maintained, and other opinions are not valued as correct.

This example provides an outline for how decisions are made and shows an important contrast in attitude toward finance between members. It speaks of theological difference and power at the Church Meeting. Alexander argues that the opportunity of the church is her 'ability as an essential vehicle for the empowerment of its adherents' (2007, p. 60). Unlike other environments, the church should be the one place where Black members can freely express their opinions and beliefs as shared at the observed meeting. However, the idea is rejected by the more powerful members who are White. Here the historic members do not listen to the request and so fail to engage with the empowerment of other members on their terms.

The following example expands the connections between speech, power and racism to also include a rejection of 'African' Prosperity Theology. Coleman Baptist is a large evangelical charismatic church. I observed the AGM with the expectation that it would be equivalent to my experience of being a minister in another similarly large church. At my previous church, the AGM would always generate multiple queries regarding finance and approval of the budget. Therefore, I was surprised that no questions were asked of the budget even though it was ambitious and based on a substantial increase in tithing from members. When I asked the minister about the lack of questions about the finance presentation to the AGM, Carol told me of a history of difficulties with finance causing conflict at the Church Meeting. I was told the story of the previous treasurer:

African and bringing the storehouses, give-give-give, tithe-tithe-tithe and it was kinda hard. And then she didn't present well, so what happened in the end was I had to kinda say to her that it's good for [another deacon] to present instead.

Carol identifies a disparity between the previous treasurer and the general view of the Church Meeting relating to finances. She contrasts the church's general view on finances with the view shared by the treasurer as 'African'. It is important to note that Coleman is a multi-ethnic church, but Carol shared that Black members rarely attend the Church Meeting. In particular, she highlights the treasurer's approach of applying biblical principles like tithing and the use of the Old Testament image of filling storehouses (Malachi 3:7–12) directly into the present day. A strong emphasis on tithing suggests a link to Prosperity Theology.

Presence of Prosperity Theology in Baptist churches

Prosperity Theology grew from a Pentecostal base and is now a present and popular theme in large North American non-denominational and Pentecostal churches that broadcast and publish widely. Bowler (2013) argues that Prosperity Theology rests upon four themes of faith, wealth, health and victory granted to individuals and churches who offer gifts and tithes to be blessed (p.7).³¹ Eben Adu (2017) in his qualitative study on the prosperity gospel, depicts the view of success through:

'Seed faith' is shown to have a biblical connection with sowing and reaping in Matthew ... and is regularly espoused by influential pastors T.D. Jakes, Frederick Price and Crefo Dollar (Adu, 2017, p. 233).

However, Adu argues that a broader, more holistic view is held by local practitioners and pastors such as Emmanuel Kapofu who states: 'It's God's will that the believer is well supplied and well taken care of financially, referring to Acts 2.42-47 and 5.1-2' (p. 230). There is also a noted connection within Prosperity Theology between African 'traditional piety and local religious demands, expressed in standard American form' (Burgess, 2008, p. 233). The expression of Prosperity Theology used by the treasurer at Coleman was seen as negative and unhelpful by the minister. The full expression of it as shared by Adu (2017) might have helped a more nuanced level of understanding to occur. At Hedger Baptist, it was the differences of expression that were rejected by the Church Meeting, however at Coleman, it was both

³¹ Similar theologies are explored by Samantha Miller (1987) who traces a connection between John Chrysostom and modern African Charismatic Theology whereby prosperity is a sign of blessing for which a Christian should tithe 'because you love Him' (p. 175). Popular pastors and prolific authors such as RT Kendall (1984) and Joel Osteen (2004) have also promoted tithing as a sign of faithfulness for Christians.

differences in expression and theology identified as African by Carol which caused significant issues in the Church Meeting.

The Black female treasurer's presentation, speech and theology jarred with the expectations of the majority White British members who attended the Church Meeting. The minister's solution was to replace the treasurer with a different person (a White British man) for presentations at Church Meetings. Ultimately the treasurer left the church entirely and the finances are now discussed at a separate meeting outside of the Church Meeting. The role of treasurer within a Baptist church is a critical one, as an elected officer responsible as a trustee and officer to oversee the budget and production of accounts to the members at Church Meetings and at the AGM. Coleman Baptist entrusted this responsibility to a Black woman but when her presentation challenged the status quo of the congregation she was put at the margins of the church again. The treasurer was simply too different in speech, ethnicity and theology for the Meeting to accept.

Power at the Church Meeting

I argue power is used by members or ministers when a member's speech is judged within the Meeting and by ministers in deciding who can present at the Meeting. Linbert Spencer (2007) as a member of the Salvation Army reflects on the experience of differences in churches and organisations:

Although most organisations say that they want individuals to bring different and innovative approaches, in practice they operate on the basis that difference is of little or no value and similarity is of great importance. This is usually not conscious or deliberate, but unless deliberate and positive action is taken to recognise, acknowledge, and promote the value of diversity, then the old order will prevail (p. 92).

Despite the major financial challenges facing both churches, as Spencer suggests, the 'old order' failed to hear Black and Brown members' contributions at the Church Meeting. As Jill Marsh writes: 'The crucial factor in the healthy development of ethnically diverse congregations is the willingness to share power and thus, to allow the whole body to be changed by members who are seen as 'other' and 'different'' (2016, p. 24). Dixon (2007) states that the reality of racism in our churches is about looking at the church, and where necessary highlighting how:

Black and Asian church members are made invisible in our churches and kept on the margins. It is also about looking honestly at how our spirituality and theology can be tools that maintain the racial status quo in our churches (p. 126).

In both Hedger and Coleman Baptist churches, Black members who spoke in different forms of speech or shared different theological viewpoints were rejected by the Church Meeting. If the theological purpose of the Church Meeting is to express the fullness of the Spirit through every member participating, then the necessary work of sharing power is required. For Baptists, I argue that the rejection of members' speech and theological views that seem different to those held by the majority of members, denies the Church Meeting its potential as the priesthood of all believers to discern the mind of Christ. The axial coding method which links causes and consequences has generated the connection between different forms of speech and ethnicity. Therefore, as Dixon states above, it is necessary to understand in greater depth how the 'racial status quo' is maintained in the Church Meeting. For this, I turn to Willie Jennings who scrutinizes racism within an institution.

Theological analysis of structural racism: Willie Jennings

This study explores the difficulties faced in belonging to and participating in the Baptist Church Meeting for church members, I argue for the necessity to share slow wisdom to encourage discernment with all members. Willie Jennings' stated aim in *After Whiteness - education in belonging* is to form a sense of belonging and communion for Black students and staff in a White academy:

Belonging must become the hermeneutic starting point from which we think the social, the political, the individual, the ecclesial and most crucial for this work ['After Whiteness'] the educational. Western education (and theological education) as it now exists works against a pedagogy of belonging (2020, p. 10).

Creating or renewing a sense of belonging in the Baptist Church Meeting is a practical expression of the Baptist biblical belief of Christians belonging to the priesthood of all believers (Ch.3). The Baptist practice of discernment at the Church Meeting is marred by a lack of belonging seen in low attendance. Jennings' argument provides an overview of theological education where belonging has been missing and seeks to create it by cultivating a:

Creaturely belonging that performs the returning of the creature to the creator, and a returning to an intimate and erotic energy that drives life together by God ... formed in the body of Jesus and the protocols of breaking, sharing, touching, tasting and seeing the goodness of God (2020, p. 11).

Jennings' experience of trying to belong as a Black academic in a White academy exemplifies the struggle that church members can experience in their hope to belong in the Church Meeting.

An investigation of belonging begins in Jennings' first major publication in 2010: *The Christian Imagination – Theology and Origins of Race*. In this volume, he provides an historical and theological review of the origins and theology of racism. Through each chapter, Jennings charts the development of racism alongside the growth of the church and colonial empires of the world from 1444 to the present. He states: 'Christian theological imagination was woven into processes of colonial dominance' (2010, p. 8), shown by Jennings in an account of a slave auction in Lagos in 1444 where Prince Henry of Portugal begins by 'following his deepest Christian instincts, ordered a tithe be given to God through the church. Two black boys were given, one to the principal church and the other to the Franciscan convent' (2010, p. 16). Jennings states that the task of colonialism was to 'subdue and Christianise [by which] church and state enfold each other in bringing forth new ways of interfacing with their world' (Ibid, p. 26). In addition, by referring to medieval typologies regarding skin colour found in the 'Book of Knowledge of all Kingdoms' (cited Ibid, p. 23)³² through to Jose de Acosta's barbarian guide (Ibid, p. 103)³³, Jennings argues that prioritising White bodies over Black bodies is seen, documented, promoted, and Whiteness³⁴ emerges (2010, p. 25).

In particular, Jennings highlights the historical problem of disconnecting land and identity. Jennings shows that through slavery which separated Black bodies from the land and from family members, 'the central issue here is the fundamental disruption and transformation of the relationship of people to place, to land' (2010, p. 245). His historical analysis of disconnecting bodies and land shifts towards bodies and space. He argues for a renewed appreciation of the doctrine of creation which is 'first a doctrine of place and people, of divine love and divine touch, of human presence and embrace and of divine and human interaction' (Ibid, p. 248). Therefore, Jennings hopes for a transformative identity and space found in Christ, a space both for communion and to see the healing of the nations, in particular for

³² See Nancy F Marino, ed., (1999). *El Libro del Conocimiento de Todos los Reinos* [The book of Knowledge of All Kingdoms]. Tempe; Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

³³ For example, 16th century Jose de Costa, categorised people groups into levels of barbarians. He determined that people who had advanced communication networks and were White were to be held above those who were nomadic and Black (Jennings, 2010, p.103). See Jose de Acosta, *De Procuranda Indorum Salute: Pacificacion y Colonizacion*. Ed L.Perena et al. (1984). Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas.

³⁴ Whiteness is also explored in Chapter 2.

Israel (Id, p. 292). However, he acknowledges the challenges of wide-ranging transformation and therefore he proposes that a 'new theological narration' is required that recognises the effect of the colonial era, seeks to explore a richer identity for theology, and addresses issues of detachment, distorted translation and failed intimacy in his context of theological education (Id, pp. 290-291). Jennings' final aim of reviewing theological education is found in his later work *After Whiteness* (2020).

Jennings presents a practical theological evaluation of theological education in *After Whiteness* (2020) that draws together themes from *The Christian Imagination* (2010). Throughout *After Whiteness*, he critiques theological education for the production of what Jennings names the 'self-sufficient man', a concept which is rooted in the system and structure of colonial Christianity (2020, p. 29). The self-sufficient man is an image of the perfect student which all other students are trained to become and assessed against, he has a command of ancient languages and has undergone the rigour of theological training offered only in Europe (Ibid, p. 59). Jennings shows that this approach limits who can excel in the academy, moreover it ensures that theological students continue to be White and male. Jennings uses narratives from everyday life in the academy to show the negative impact of the self-sufficient man. He cites the story of Mr. Yoo whose essay had been marked down for poor grammar by a teaching assistant stating it was:

Terrible, juvenile, not at the level of graduate work ... [but] I knew Mr. Yoo. He spoke and wrote in Korean, Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), French, Italian and Swahili, having lived in all these places that these languages call home (2020, p. 55).

Evidence for the self-sufficient man is found, Jennings argues, in fragments of exchange such as with Mr Yoo, design (of courses and assessment), building through institutions and practices, the motions of the daily life of the institution and the erotic (bodily) power of Whiteness.

Using Edward Schillebeeckx's essay; 'Secular Criticism of Christian Obedience and the Christian reaction to that criticism', Jennings suggests that Schillebeeckx recognised the presence of the self-sufficient man and argued his existence was rooted in both Hellenistic and Roman visions of humanity's grandeur in which humility is not admired (2020, p. 30). Schillebeeckx highlighted that Aristotle 'expresses a supreme disdain for every form of servile

subjection’³⁵ (1980, p. 168) and that the ‘Greek saw Christian obedience as a direct attack against man’s grandeur’ (Ibid, p. 171). Jennings states that this vision is in direct contrast to ‘the God of the Christians [who] was a crucified slave who cried and prayed to God for help, not a self-sufficient man’ (Ibid). Jennings highlights Schillebeeckx's reliance on Thomas Aquinas arguing that ‘there must be no competition between man’s grandeur and the humility he must have in God’ (Ibid, p. 31), for all gifts that man³⁶ has are given by God.³⁷ Schillebeeckx, therefore, identifies the self-sufficient man as ‘secular ... who does not appear to be aware of his loneliness and his non-solidarity’ (Schillebeeckx, 1980, p. 167). However, Jennings argues Schillebeeckx neglects to acknowledge that:

European Christian settlers to the new worlds of Africa, the Americas and other soon-to-be colonised lands, from the 15th century forward, were already reconciling the ancient regime and the modern world, already weaving together a pre-Christian and a Christian vision of the self-sufficient man and lodging that weaved vision definitively in its educational visions in the new worlds (2020, p. 31).

Writing in 1980, Edward Schillebeeckx considers in his essay how historic great traditions can shed ‘critical light on certain blind spots today’ (1980, p. 167). Schillebeeckx’s task is to assure Aquinas’ view is promoted, that power and humility are known to be gifts given by God. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of Christians ‘to listen to the cry of two-thirds of the world for liberation and redemption’ (Ibid, p. 182). Jennings recasts Schillebeeckx’s understanding of the grand man and argues that mastery is seen now in the Christian self-sufficient man who is also White. Jennings states that the self-sufficient man is found in a Christian vision woven with racism and colonialism. In theological education, Jennings shows the unhelpful presence of the self-sufficient man in design, fragments, motions and buildings. He calls for Christian humility to be rediscovered in his context. This kind of Christian humility would be liberating in the sense that Schillebeeckx suggests and could develop education in belonging. Jennings’ hope is that institutions would be created as a place of communion and so form a ‘Jesus space’:

This Jesus space draws people to flourishing life together and to a work of building together. But building what? The answer is not what but where – they build around his body, they build against death, and they build toward a place of gathering that will never end’ (2020, p. 76).

Willie Jennings’ consideration of theological education provides a critique of history, theology and practice. He offers a corrective to the problem of the self-sufficient man by creating a new

³⁵ Jennings cites Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1124b, 20-1125a).

³⁶ I use man here as Jennings does to replicate the patriarchal nature of Aquinas’ statement.

³⁷ Jennings cites Aquinas (*Summa Theological*, 1271, 2a-2ae, 161/129).

place of communion in which to explore theology, built around the self-sacrificing body of Jesus and towards an eschatological hope in belonging that endures.

'After Whiteness' enables change in new contexts

In 2022, a special edition of the Journal of Practical Theology 'Critical white theology: dismantling whiteness?' was published by editors Al Barrett and Jill Marsh. Barrett and Marsh described the year as a 'kairos' moment to dismantle Whiteness in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and of the publication of *After Whiteness* (2022, p. 1). Anthony Reddie (2022) argued that both events caused 'a seismic change in the consciousness of White people as it pertains to racial justice' (p. 168). Reddie stated that *After Whiteness* contributed to a shift in consciousness for White people about racism, however, this shift also has a broader application in terms of disability and trauma. Benjamin Conner's (2021) analysis of disability and education extends Jennings' work. Conner is sympathetic to the experience of Black students in theological education. He finds a commonality between the Black experience and the disabled experience of education where those who are 'non-disabled are seen as superior' (2021, p. 248). Conner argues that the 'finished' man exists and disabled people are isolated and excluded from attaining this status (Ibid, p. 244-246). He proposes that Jennings' concept of the self-sufficient man is also able-bodied. He urges, just as Jennings' does, for greater inclusion of students in education. Shelly Rambo (2021) identifies that the work of *After Whiteness* shows a shift in Black theology away from 'concepts of agency and subjectivity – the tenets of the maturity project of Whiteness – with reference to bodies' (Rambo, 2021, p. 999). Jennings' work highlights how it feels to experience Whiteness and uses personal vignettes to expose a visceral Whiteness that supports only the self-sufficient man to succeed. Rambo uses Jennings to draw a parallel to her work on trauma, stating that Whiteness in theological education is like trauma where 'trauma is what you cannot bear to see and others don't want you to see' (2021, p. 1001). Both Conner and Rambo find an ally in Jennings whose review of education enables a broader discussion of the role of bodies in access to theological formation and the experience of trauma.

Returning to Jennings' vision of a 'Jesus space' (2020, p. 76), Brandy Daniels proposes the construction of places of discomfort for theological education. She argues that Jennings invites a sense of discomfort and that:

It is through discomfort, through constructing a space where students might be uncomfortably (sic) deformed by difference – through slouching together, after Pentecost, that the aims of

liberation, justice and freedom held by those of us who teach, learn and reside at the intersections of religion, race, gender and sexuality might be further enacted and realized (Daniels, 2022, p. 881).

Daniels shows that experiencing unfamiliarity helps students and educators to ‘examine how our modes of seeing have been shaped specifically by the dominant culture of the historical moment’ (Daniels, 2022, p. 879). She draws on Jennings to argue that Whiteness ‘restricts how we can imagine how we might be with each other’ (Ibid, p. 880). Daniels develops Jennings’ proposal of a gathering place around Jesus and instead moves towards Pentecost. While the image of Pentecost evokes liberating themes of freedom across genders and ages as the Spirit is gifted to all present (Acts 2), it strays from Jennings’ original intention contrasting the self-sufficient man with Jesus, ‘Jesus is the one who offers his body to create space for communion with God, a joining space. This is God serving. The man who serves, in profound contrast, ransoms the many for the one’ (2020, p. 75). Jennings’ aim is to evoke a new sense of humility first that liberates all.

Earlier in 2021, Reddie recognised Jennings’ work as highly influential as:

After Whiteness speaks to the necessity of recognising the issues of power in the construction of epistemology that define the development of Christianity across three-quarters of its life, where the Church served as the primary institution that helped to define truth but also to provide the rationale of what it means to be human. Central to this framing of epistemology has been the power of Whiteness (2021, p. 1016).

Reddie celebrates Jennings’ work as it opens the reader’s eye using narrative and poetic form to show how Whiteness is embedded in knowledge and power, which exposes ‘deeply submerged tropes and constructs’ (Reddie, 2021, p. 1018) to decentre Whiteness. However, Reddie critiques Jennings on his presentation of Whiteness ‘as a conceptual norm as opposed to an anthropological framing around the nature of human subjectivity of those racialised as White’ (2021, p. 1024). Reddie’s concern is that Jennings therefore ‘permits the development of an affective and cognitive form of distancing for White people’ (Ibid, p. 1025) where the overwhelming nature of Whiteness is too large and too difficult to engage with or change.

While Jennings considers the roots of normative Whiteness across *The Christian Imagination*, his principal concern in *After Whiteness* is White self-sufficient masculinity which he states is:

A way of organising life with ideas and forming a persona that distorts identity and strangles the possibilities of dense life together. In this regard, my use of the term “whiteness” does not

refer to people of European descent but to a way of being in the world and seeing the world that forms cognitive and affective structures able to seduce people into its habitation and its meaning-making (2020, p. 8-9).

Jennings' argument is based on the self-sufficient man existing as part of 'the diseased imagination' (2010, p. 9) and Whiteness as a seductive source of epistemology both of which imply a choice rather than an avoidable conceptual norm. *The Christian Imagination* demonstrates how far and wide the implications of Whiteness stretch across theology, to which end Jennings calls for a renewed doctrine of creation. It could be said that Jennings presents Whiteness as an historically dominant conceptual norm, but he also calls for change to reject the norm, renew theology and reform practice. While the overwhelming nature of Whiteness is now being dismantled as the evidence of the special issue of Practical Theology suggests, Jennings' work is being explored in particular ways to distinctive projects such as the creation of a journal issue on mission, race and colonialism (Ross and Butler, 2022). Moreover, it is here that Jennings' analysis can influence change in the practice of the Baptist Church Meeting.

'Design' and the Church Meeting

Jennings' insight into the structural nature of racism provides a lens to explore the design of the Baptist Church Meeting. Using the example of the design of theological education provided by Jennings, I argue that the historic White majority of members typically reject or fail to include younger members, members from different denominations and Black and Brown members at the Church Meeting as they are not held in affection in the design of the Church Meeting. By reflecting on Jennings' work, I argue for a slow wisdom that combats exclusion by reaffirming Baptist theological principles (Chapter 3) and by the practical measure of using small groups in discernment (Chapters 5 and 7).

The design of theological education in Europe and America according to Jennings (2020) pivots on creating students in the likeness of the self-sufficient man. This is demonstrated by attention given to European affections which results in a resistance of self and in a failure to attend to one another and the wider world. Jennings states:

Design is organised around attention, affection and resistance, each aiming, each navigating – each a design that designs... these energies have been drawn into a distorting creativity that slowly drains us of life by pressing us to perform a particular kind of man (2020, p. 49).

In the academy, Jennings argues that the attention formed through colonialism attributes value to particular forms of European knowledge and denies scholars the ability to pay constant

attention to each other as seen in the example of Mr Yoo above (2020, p. 50-52). This designed knowledge is seen in ‘an assimilation that defines serious, rigorous, scholarly – not with a broad beautiful vision of paying attention, but through a strangled, suffocating vision that defines these ideas by a relentless Eurocentrism’ (Ibid, p. 52). The self-sufficient man is a student who holds a form of intellect ‘cultivated by brutality, through a design that demands Euro-masculinist gesture as the required carrier of this student’s ideas, her creativity and her search for understanding’ (Ibid, p. 59).

Affection is the name given by Jennings (2020) to the desire of the theological academy to promote European values of importance and beauty alone. Jennings observes a forced affection which refuses to share meaning and purpose with those outside of Europe where White theologians and philosophers are revered with ‘non white others as spices to season a dish’ (Ibid, p. 64). Resistance, as Jennings outlines, is seen in students who attempt to attain the self-sufficient man by stifling culture or sexuality (Id, p. 67) and those students are not ‘guided in the work of cultivating their own resistance’ (Id, p. 69). Jennings argues instead that supporting a design of education to produce the self-sufficient man, ‘we should work towards a design that aims at an attention that forms deeper habits of attending to one another and to the world around us’ (2020, p. 69). The remedy proposed by Jennings to change the design of theological education is wholesale change with a new kind of design of intellectual affection. Jennings argues that this affection ‘requires a discerning love that knows how to perform an exclusion that does not isolate but opens toward more intense listening and learning from one another’ (2020, p. 67) and to develop a form of resistance that builds community (Ibid, p. 72).

Through Jennings’ work on design, I argue that slow wisdom must include a renewed appreciation of different views held among members. An example of a correlation between Jennings’ assessment of design in education and design in the Church Meeting is seen in the example of the Hedger Baptist barbecue. The White secretary’s preference is for spending less money on church meals, or as Jennings would identify, her affection is for church activities that are low cost. Nell views this as a proper use of church funds. Nell’s view was upheld by the Church Meeting because Nell is White, older, and in a position of power. Yet the historic members do not listen to the barbecue request and so fail to engage with the empowerment of other members on their terms. This example code provides an outline for how decisions are made and shows an important difference in attitude toward finance between members. It speaks of racism and power at the Church Meeting. It was shared by a younger Black member

from a different denominational background. As argued in Chapter 6, from analysing the participant churches, the historic White majority of church members typically fail to welcome the ideas of younger members, members from different denominations and Black and Brown members at the Church Meeting as their views are not held in affection in the design of the Church Meeting. Slow wisdom seeks to counter these issues by arguing for participation and welcoming all members' contributions in discernment, and the Church Meeting provides a definitive context for members to belong and flourish in the church.

Comparing slow wisdom and Jennings' structural analysis of racism

In this thesis, I have argued for the full participation of members to benefit from using slow wisdom. Willie Jennings' view of history in *The Christian Imagination* and theological education in *After Whiteness* provides an interpretative framework to understand the experience of Black and Brown members in the Church Meeting. His commonality as a Baptist is important as it indicates a similar denominational outlook to the sample Baptist churches, while his Black theological epistemology provides a critical balance and insight into the practice of discernment. Jennings' term 'the self-sufficient man' is used as a mechanism to describe the ambition of students and staff to conform to the expectations of Whiteness. By extending Schillebeeckx's use of the 'grand man', he shows how instead of incorporating humility as a key concept in theology and education, the secular image of the self-sufficient man is incorporated into Christianity and enmeshed with colonialism. Jennings argues for a new place of belonging for those studying and teaching theology, one gathered around the body of Jesus in humility and attentive to one another.

Writers like Conner have extended Jennings' work to highlight the need for inclusion of the disabled alongside Black students and Rambo draws on the similarities of trauma and Whiteness. Daniels finds the discomfort raised by the issues of Whiteness shown by Jennings as a necessary location for teaching as a space for enacted liberation. Reddie, for the most part, allies himself to Jennings closely, however, Reddie argues that Jennings presents a view of Whiteness to be a conceptual norm to the extent that change is seen as unobtainable by White people. Nonetheless, I suggest Jennings illuminates the reality of Whiteness in theological education and offers a corrective: belonging in communion with Jesus. His project is one of retrieval of the humility expressed in service in the life of Christ and of offering his body as a gathering place.

Jennings' analysis of design has a strong resonance with the following concerns regarding discernment at the Church Meeting. In affection, attention and resistance in design Black and Brown members encounter Whiteness. The conceptual 'self-sufficient man' is seen in the rejection of other forms of difference perceived by the historical norm of the Church Meeting as shown in Chapter 6. Jennings' proposal of a new kind of listening that is fully attentive to others correlates to the role of listening within slow wisdom which is explored in Chapter 5. The hope of *After Whiteness* is to gather students and teachers in a place of belonging, a Jesus space. A Baptist concern for the participation of all members echoes Jennings' desire to foster a sense of belonging for students. Slow wisdom is a model of discernment that offers a practical expression of belonging in Baptist discernment at the Church Meeting.

In terms of the Church Meeting, I identify similar patterns of affection in terms of speech and theological views. At Hedger, the way Black members spoke was judged as not diplomatic or not proper as Jennings might suggest. Instead, the design of the Church Meeting is for the acceptable speech patterns to be those normally used by White members. Furthermore, at Coleman, the Prosperity Theology viewpoint judged to be incorrect was identified as African and failed to fit the White theological epistemology for the church. The power used by those making judgments on acceptable speech or a particular theological viewpoint created and sustained a design for a Church Meeting that prioritised European values above all else.

Small groups increase belonging at the Church Meeting

Jennings argues that attending to one another is a way to dismantle the power of racism within the academy. As a first step, I argue that using the practice of group work at the Church Meeting enables attending or listening to one another in such a way as to bring real change. The design of small group work within the structure of the Church Meeting is just one way that members can attend to each other. Jennings calls for change in theological education by reforming the design of education: 'We should work towards a design that aims at an attention that forms deeper habits of attending to one another and to the world around us' (2020, p. 51). As Jennings' poem expresses, attending to each other is deeper than listening:

I will listen, but I am not hear
You will speak, but you are not here-ing
You here me – putting me in my place
But this is not my place, it belongs to
Those not wanting escape, me
I am gone, my inside outside already
Searching to hear where I am heard

As I listen. (2020, p. 72-73)

Attending to one another for Jennings is to offer an intellectual affection that is ‘open toward more intense listening and learning from one another’ (Ibid, p. 67). By modifying the design of Church Meetings to include small group work, members attend to each other and so disrupt pre-existing power structures. The concept of slow wisdom as a positive Baptist practice of discernment for the Church Meeting includes group work. I argue small groups at the Church Meeting enable the critical role of listening to others who are present in discernment. If steps to attend to each other are practiced at the local Church Meeting, I suggest that broader discernment at regional and national levels might be renewed as well.

Reviewing interview data on racism and the Church Meeting has given greater scope to my reflection on Baptist practice. It holds in tension demographic changes in neighbourhoods, experiences of racism, issues of power in Baptist discernment processes and my privilege of Whiteness as a researcher. Jennings (2020) provides a key example of the design and affections of an educational institution formed by European values above all else. His critique sheds light on the Baptist Church Meeting where there may be preferred terms of speech or theology and little room for difference. I argue from the project data that group work which carefully helps each person to express their opinion will offer one way for differences to be shared and explored at a Church Meeting. Here the Baptist practice of listening to each other provides space in which a radical model of empowerment can be used. Listening and attending to different voices at the Church Meeting is critical to discernment, to the practice of slow wisdom and the vitality of the Baptist church as the priesthood of all believers.

8. Conclusion

By analysing the Baptist Church Meeting, this thesis identifies a distinctive theological pattern for Baptist discernment: *slow wisdom*. I have shown that slow wisdom is characterised by prayer, listening to each other and God and exemplified in the best practice of small group work. Slow wisdom is held as embodied Christian practical wisdom which gives expression to the lived faith of Baptists. Baptists do not use slow wisdom when members who speak differently from the norm of the Church Meeting are excluded. I argue if slow wisdom is used, the Church Meeting can return to a place of radical inclusion with the prophetic nature of discernment.

Below I summarise the discovery of slow wisdom and show the impact of articulating slow wisdom for excluded members. Two benefits are shown as a result of combining Practical Theology and qualitative research: an increased knowledge of discernment as embodied wisdom and generating a Baptist research approach. I identify areas for further reflection on the lived experience of faith for Baptists. As a result of this project, I was invited to speak at a recent symposium on Receptive Ecumenism where I shared slow wisdom as an emerging best practice. I have become aware of the limitations of this thesis, in particular how Baptists discern beyond the local Church Meeting, therefore I compare Baptist discernment to other denominations with broader discernment structures. I outline how slow wisdom might help Baptists in discerning at regional and national levels, for example, regarding human sexuality.

Articulation of practice: Slow wisdom

To the best of my knowledge, this project is the only Practical Theology research in discernment for Baptists. Through qualitative tools, I have articulated Baptist discernment as slow wisdom. This contributes to denominational knowledge regarding the fundamental activity of Baptists: the Church Meeting. As such, slow wisdom expands the existing discernment literature which centres on the historical development of the Church Meeting and the nature of Baptist identity. The marks of slow wisdom identified in this project are a slow schedule of Church Meetings, patterns of prayer; extempore, intercessory and testing to discern, the prophetic leading of the Spirit by unexpected members, listening and hearing all members' contributions, establishing consensus agreement and the use of small group work. I have argued that slow wisdom is created and formed by members as a shared knowledge within the framework of the Church Meeting. I show that slow wisdom uses a rarely articulated or honoured form of embodied knowledge; a *phronesis* generated by the presence of members

listening attentively to each other and God in prayer. Slow wisdom is not related to biblical images of revelation but is known by Baptists as a lived experience of faith, I demonstrate it is therefore, Christian practical wisdom.

As a model of governance, I suggest that the Church Meeting is a radical and prophetic place. I show that a renewal of its prophetic nature (Holmes, 2011) can be found by comparing it to the use of practical wisdom in education by bell hooks. bell hooks' (1994, 2003, 2010) practical wisdom suggests maintaining an open approach to learning through engaged pedagogy creates a radical classroom. I argue that slow wisdom should maintain a similar attitude by being open to change and new ideas but led by the Spirit who speaks afresh and renews the Church Meeting as a radical place. Baptists prioritise discernment at the Church Meeting as 'this body life', I suggest this indicates a central belief in the priesthood of all believers and being part of the body of Christ which connects to the historical roots of BUGB. Such a radical and prophetic approach to making decisions through a process of discernment grants comfort to Baptists of our identity and of God's blessing upon slow wisdom.

Impact of expressing discernment as slow wisdom for excluded members

After conducting the fieldwork for this project, I was asked by a local Baptist church to present slow wisdom at a termly theology discussion held at church on a Sunday evening. Immediately after speaking, a member thanked me profusely saying: 'I came from an Anglican background and I never understood what the Church Meeting was all about, this has truly opened my eyes' (Research log, 16/10/22). This member had been a church trustee for over ten years. The impact of being able to describe and articulate what discernment is for Baptists means that now Baptists can effectively share slow wisdom as a distinctive and important practice with new members.

I argue that unless Baptist churches ensure the Church Meeting is welcoming to members from other denominations and younger members who have 'one leg in, one leg out', slow wisdom is not likely to be found. I have offered tailored reflections for each group, with best practice examples of inclusion from sample churches provided. To include younger members, I suggest that the Church Meeting be held on a Sunday after the service and to offer childcare provision as observed at Gates Baptist Church. The research on denominational affiliation shows that Christians are less likely to attend a particular denomination, therefore I suggest that Baptist churches cannot assume knowledge of Baptist practice, and new members may

not know the importance of discernment at the Church Meeting or how to discern together. I argue that slow wisdom and how to discern together at the Church Meeting must be knowledge that is shared widely. Further materials could be prepared from this thesis to generate shareable information and training opportunities on slow wisdom for local churches.

As a White practitioner-researcher, I was not prepared to hear that a church was ‘too black’ and other accounts of racism in some Baptist Church Meetings. In these cases, church members and ministers had experienced discrimination within discernment because their contributions were judged as too different from the historic norm of the Meeting. I reflect on Willie Jennings’ (2010, 2020) analysis of Whiteness within education as an institution. He shows that education revolves around a ‘self-sufficient man’ as the epitome of a perfect student. Jennings argues that the pursuit of nurturing students in this manner generates an institution with particular preferences (or affections) that reject difference. I argue that the Church Meeting can likewise be dominated by a historic set of preferences held by members who are White. In such cases, members often reject different ideas and theologies heard from Black and Brown members and in so doing fail to uncover slow wisdom. Slow wisdom only discerns the mind of Christ when all members are enabled to participate. A multi-voiced discernment leads a church into a fuller exploration of what the Spirit might be saying to our congregations. I show that the use of small group work is one way to enable more voices to be heard and disrupt existing power structures.

Expanded knowledge through qualitative research and Practical Theology

As a Practical Theology project, I have analysed the lived experience of faith (Swinton and Mowat, 2016) and questioned the concrete reality of the Church Meeting (Ballard and Pritchard, 1996) using qualitative research methods. By this approach, I have expanded the existing knowledge of discernment practice. This project shows that in reality, Baptists use embodied knowledge as an epistemological cue in discernment over biblical models of revelation from God or using the bible to discern (Holmes, 2010 and Grenz, 2002). Participants described discerning the mind of Christ as sensing and feeling comfort and peace in three ways: by accepting a decision, overturning a previous decision and by a member speaking who normally refrains from contributing. Baptists knew the mind of Christ had been discerned when it was sensed in one or all of these three actions. Embodied knowledge of discernment is for long-standing Baptists like ‘a layer of sedimentation...that gains salience’ (Scharen, 2016, p. 174) granting comfort and peace of mind. Baptist discernment uses

embodied knowledge as phronesis and therefore slow wisdom is Christian practical wisdom. Moreover, I highlight that the practice of the Church Meeting is a bodily activity, members need to be present to participate, to vote with their hands and to speak with their mouths. Baptist bodies are conversely dis-membered by conflict at the Church Meeting and remove their bodily presence from discernment. This research has shown the true nature of the embodied Baptist life, of ‘this body life’, for when members fail to attend, the body of Christ is felt to be incomplete for the gathered church. The advantage of combining Practical Theology and qualitative research uncovered an embodied knowledge that is critical to Baptist discernment. There are further distinctive areas of Baptist life and worship that would benefit from similar reflection, for example within the Declaration of Principle (1873), on baptism by immersion and evangelism within the local church.

Generating a new Baptist approach to Practical Theology and qualitative research

Through using four local sample churches and 12 interview participants, the project and my interpretation of the data led to a Baptist research approach of multi-voiced participation in discernment. The concept of multi-voiced qualitative research as a ‘polyphony’ (Fontana, 1994) resonated with the Baptist theological principle of the priesthood of all believers where all members can discern God’s guidance. Therefore, preserving and celebrating the voices of participants was important to me as a Baptist practitioner-researcher. Throughout the analysis of data, I sought to demonstrate how participant voices had shaped the project by using In Vivo concept codes in the first cycle of coding and through sharing their narrated experiences of discernment within each chapter. Furthermore, by sharing thick descriptions of practice (Geertz, 1973), a qualitative approach has expanded the field of research relating to Baptist church life and discernment itself. By using stratified sampling, the population was set in my local district within the London Baptist Association, with strata samples then taken from different-sized churches (Silverman, 2010). This approach to data generates cross-contextual generalities (Thompson, 2012, Trost, 1986). My research design was created to answer the specific question of discernment in a particular context of north London by using a representative sample (Dudovskiy, 2020). It would be beneficial to test the idea of slow wisdom in a broader range of geographical areas, particularly in areas that are different to multi-ethnic London churches. A contrasting study celebrating the voices of other Baptists completed in rural churches or northern England would be a useful comparison.

Engaging with Receptive Ecumenism

Slow wisdom is a model of discernment that is novel to Baptists, however, it is also significant in reviewing discernment for different denominational contexts. In June 2023, I was invited to speak at an Ecumenical symposium: 'Learning on the Way: Receptive Ecumenism and the Catholic Synodal Pathway' for Church Leaders, Practitioners, and Theologians in England and Wales hosted by the Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University, and the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. I presented slow wisdom alongside theologians from the Roman Catholic Church, Methodist Church, Society of Friends, Church of England, United Reformed Church, and Pentecostal tradition. I suggest that slow wisdom uses similar language in discernment to other churches but is held within the local structure of the Church Meeting which is sustained by the relationships created by membership.

Receptive Ecumenism provided a rationale and framework for the symposium, in the act of inviting other denominations to participate and through the disciplined use of small groups in listening to each other and reflecting on papers given. Receptive Ecumenism arose within the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) as a movement for change and as an 'imperative that we should receive and learn from each other across the divisions between the churches' (Avis, 2012, p. 225) which hopes to 'facilitate our own growth together into deepened communion with Christ and the Spirit' (Murray, 2008, p. x). It operates with 'the principle of attending to the ecclesial wounds of one's own tradition by receiving with integrity from one's ecumenical others ... as a source of learning and healing' (Ryan, 2023, p. 20). The RCC has begun urgent work attending to its wounds of 'clericalism, ecclesial power and sexual abuse' (Luciani, 2022, p. 9) through discernment of renewal amongst the clergy, church and wider structures.

The symposium used the principles of Receptive Ecumenism to explore synodality in the RCC. Synodality is a broad term that envisions a pathway for change in the RCC seen across the synod, structure and style of the church (Ryan, 2023, p. 5). Synodality is:

The particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel (Synod 2021-2024, Secretaria Generalis Synodi, 2021).

This RCC statement resonates strongly with the Baptist language and expression in terms of the church as the people of God, a gathered assembly and journeying together. For example, there are echoes of the 17th century Gainsborough Baptist congregation whose members: 'Joyned them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a Church estate, in the fellowship of the

gospel, to walke in all his ways, made known, or to be made known unto them' (1608 cited Fiddes, 2006, p. 21), which is reflected in the present-day Baptist membership vows shared in *Gathering for Worship* (2005):

Leader: Will you, as the members of (this church) promise to share your lives and journey of faith with A (new member), walking together in ways that are known and yet to be made known?

Church members: We will (p. 79-80).

Slow wisdom, I suggested, is a model that shows how churches can discern together in a local context as an expression of being the people of God, gathered by Christ and called to journey together and as such offers a form of synodality for Baptists. Within the focus group discussion, it became apparent that the distinctive relationships created through covenantal membership and the structure of the Church Meeting help Baptists ground discernment within a congregation and maintain an environment where slow wisdom can flourish. Further reflection on the role of membership and sustaining slow wisdom would extend the knowledge of discernment for Baptists. The analysis of the Church Meeting as an enabling structure for members to shape the direction of their congregation provided in this thesis would offer a prospect for consideration in denominations without local discernment at present.

Slow wisdom beyond the Church Meeting

However, while listening to other contributions in the spirit of Receptive Ecumenism, it became clear that Baptists had discerned at an international level but could learn from denominations who discern within regional and national ecclesiastical structures. For the Baptist briefing paper, Fiddes (2023) provided an example of international discernment at the General Council of the Baptist World Alliance meeting in Ghana (July 2007) regarding the need for Western churches to apologize for slavery which was given at BUGB National Council in November 2007 and led to wider considerations and resources published about racial injustice (2023, pg. 9). From this research I would identify that the use of slow wisdom was present at the World Alliance meeting through hearing different voices and being open to change and renewal. A benefit of naming slow wisdom as discernment for Baptists is to be aware of the mark of slow wisdom, to actively seek them in discerning together and to celebrate the radical decisions made as led by the Spirit.

In terms of regional and national discernment, Baptists are less able to demonstrate discerning the mind of Christ. In contrast, Liz Kent (2023) presented a Methodist model of conferring through conference, synod, circuit and church council, where discernment in the Methodists is led by a spirit of connexionalism in which all local churches ‘contribute to and receive from the life and mission of the whole Church’ (Price-Tebbutt, Conference Report, 2017, p. 5) which led to effective discernment regarding human sexuality (Kent, 2023, p. 4). Fiddes (2022) suggests that Baptists began with a spirit of connection across local churches as seen in the 1644 London Confession where ‘although particular congregations be distinct and severall (sic) Bodies ... yet are they all to walk by one and the same rule’ (Lumpkin, 1959, p. 168-169). However, he identifies that an ‘area of uncertainty for Baptists has been the link between the local body and the universal body’ (Fiddes, 2022, p. 14). The model of regional discernment shown in the Methodist model of conferring provides an impetus for further research that would be beneficial to Baptists on using slow wisdom beyond the local context of individual churches.

At present, Baptists are facing the burgeoning issue of human sexuality and ministerial conduct. This is an acute issue for Baptists for while the local church can host same-sex marriage ceremonies, Baptist ministers are accredited nationally and submit to the ministerial code of conduct which limits ministers to marriage between a man and woman (Ministerial Recognition Rules, Appendix 3, Section 4.3, 2022). While sexual orientation has not been a reason for exclusion from ministry, following the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2013, calls for change to allow ministers to enter same-sex marriages have been heard (March Council statement, 2016). Now that BUGB has begun a national listening project on human sexuality, I suggest looking for the marks of slow wisdom would be beneficial to this discernment process. In particular, I would argue that the voices who speak differently to the historic norm of the Baptist church should be actively included and heard so that the prophetic leading of the Spirit might enable Baptists to discern the mind of Christ.

Through articulating discernment practice, slow wisdom provides a discernment language, model and best practice examples for Baptists in discerning the mind of Christ. I hope that slow wisdom gives a renewed outlook on the practice of the Church Meeting as a place of radical and prophetic opportunity for the Spirit to lead the church wherever God may lead.

Church Participant information sheet

How do Baptists discern the mind of Christ at a Church Meeting?

As XXX Baptist Church you are being asked to take part in a research project about Church Meetings. Please consider carefully if XXX would be willing to give permission for the researcher to observe one Church Meeting. The church members will need to grant consent for the project to include XXX. After the observed meetings, the minister and two XXX members (one male, one female) will be asked to volunteer to be interviewed.

Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

This project is the first to examine the practice of discernment by Baptist church members at a Baptist Church Meeting in the UK. By looking at the practice of discernment, this research provides a reason for maintaining and celebrating Church Meetings as vital to Baptist identity. Four Baptist churches will be observed and the minister and two individual church members will be interviewed from each church. A thesis will be produced at the end of the research. The outcome of this research will increase knowledge of what happens at Church Meetings and offer recommendations for the future of Baptist Church Meetings in the Baptist Union.

Outline of interview topics for individual church members

Following on from participating at the Church Meeting at XXX, individual church members will be interviewed. The semi-structured format will be based upon the specific experience of the observed Church Meeting attended by the researcher.

The topics will include:

- Analysis of how a decision is made
- Role of prayer and revelation in spiritual discernment
- Influence of powerful members/chair
- Silence and non-participation of members
- Discernment and Baptist identity

Why have we been chosen?

Sample churches have been chosen to demonstrate a range of types of Baptist Church in different communities close to the researcher's church.

Do we have to take part?

Please consider at a Church Meeting if XXX would like to take part or not. If you decide to take part, XXX will be given this information sheet to keep and the secretary asked to sign a consent form on behalf of the church. If XXX decides to take part, the church is welcome to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen to us if we take part?

All sample churches will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign the consent form. Once your consent form is complete, the researcher will observe one Church Meeting. She will make an audio and written recording of the meeting and ask for a copy of the minutes to triangulate her recordkeeping.

XXX will be asked to adopt a pseudonym for reference in the research project.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

While being observed, some church members may feel uncomfortable taking part. The research may find examples of best practice within XXX, or it may suggest different practices should be adopted. Participating in this project may cause church members to think differently about the Church Meeting.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

This research will increase Baptist church members knowledge of the Church Meeting. As part of the research project, all contributions will be of wider significance to the Baptist Union.

What if something goes wrong?

If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during this study, please contact:

Professor Wayne Morris
Associate Dean of Humanities
University of Chester
Parkgate Road
Chester
CH1 4BJ
w.morris@chester.ac.uk

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All information that is collected about XXX during the research will be kept strictly confidential so that only the researcher carrying out the research will have access to such information. Your information will be securely stored and not kept beyond the period of study.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

All the information gathered at the Church Meeting and through individual interviews will be used to write a thesis about Baptist decision-making. It will increase Baptist knowledge about the core practice of Church Meetings. It is hoped that this study will strengthen the discernment process for Baptist churches.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The researcher is a full-time Baptist minister. She is funded to study by her home church and the Baptist Union Further Studies Fund. Neither the church or the Baptist Union have specified the subject area.

Who may I contact for further information?

If you would like more information about the research before you decide whether you would be willing to take part, please contact:

Reverend Ruth Moriarty

Thank you for your interest in this research.

Church Consent form

Title of Project:

How do Baptists discern the mind of Christ at a Church Meeting?

Name of Researcher:

Reverend Ruth Moriarty

Please initial box

1. We confirm that XXX Baptist Church has read and understood the participant information sheet, dated,for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. We understand that XXX Baptist Church's participation is voluntary and that we are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without our care or legal rights being affected.
3. We agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Church secretary
On behalf of XXX

Date

Signature

Name of Person taking consent
(if different from researcher)

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Individual Participants information sheet

How do Baptists discern the mind of Christ at a Church Meeting?

As a member of XXX Baptist Church, you are being asked to take part in a research project about Church Meetings. Please consider carefully if you would like to participate in an individual interview with the researcher by reading the information below. Before your interview, you will need to sign the consent form.

Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

This project is the first to examine the practice of discernment by Baptist church members at a Baptist Church Meeting in the UK. By looking at the practice of discernment, this research provides a reason for maintaining and celebrating Church Meetings as vital to Baptist identity. Four Baptist churches will be observed and the minister and two individual church members will be interviewed from each church. A thesis will be produced at the end of the research. The outcome of this research will increase knowledge of what happens at Church Meetings and offer recommendations for the future of Baptist Church Meetings in the Baptist Union.

Outline of interview topics for individual church members

Following on from participating at the Church Meeting at XXX, individual church members will be interviewed. The semi-structured format will be based upon the specific experience of the observed Church Meeting attended by the researcher.

The topics will include:

- Analysis of how a decision is made
- Role of prayer and revelation in spiritual discernment
- Influence of powerful members/chair
- Silence and non-participation of members
- Discernment and Baptist identity

Why have I been chosen?

As you have attended the Church Meeting that has been observed by the researcher, you have been selected to give an individual church member's view of the group decision-making process. It does not matter if you did or did not speak in the observed meeting.

Do I have to take part?

Please decide if you would like to take part or not. If you decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are welcome to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

All participants will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign the consent form. You will also be asked if you wish to declare your gender and or ethnicity. While it is helpful to the project to be able to analyse Church Meeting participants in greater detail, you will not be excluded if you would rather not grant this personal information to the research project.

Once your consent form is complete, a 60minute interview will be arranged with you and the researcher. In the interview, you will be asked to consider how you experienced the decision-making at the observed Church Meeting. With your permission, the interview will be audio taped. You will be asked to adopt a pseudonym for reference in the research project.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

In the interview, the researcher will ask you about your experience of decision-making, it may be that this will remind you of a difficult discussion in the past or the present. If this is the case, it may be helpful to you to talk about it.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

It is hoped that this research will increase Baptist church members knowledge of the Church Meeting. As part of the research project, all contributions will be of wider significance to the Baptist Union.

What if something goes wrong?

If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during this study, please contact:

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What will happen to the results of the research study?

All the information gathered at the Church Meeting and through individual interviews will be used to write a thesis about Baptist decision-making. It will increase Baptist knowledge about a core practice of Church Meetings. It is hoped that this study will strengthen the discernment process for Baptist churches.

Who is organising and funding the research?

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Who may I contact for further information?

If you would like more information about the research before you decide whether you would be willing to take part, please contact:

Reverend Ruth Moriarty

Thank you for your interest in this research.

Individual Consent form

Title of Project:

How do Baptists discern the mind of Christ at a Church Meeting?

Name of Researcher:

Reverend Ruth Moriarty

Please initial box

- 4. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet, dated, for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- 5. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my care or legal rights being affected.
- 6. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Person taking consent
(if different from researcher)

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix 5

Volunteer contact form

Yes I'm happy to be interviewed about the Church Meeting

Name:

Address:

.....

Phone:

Email:

Thank you



Image: Dave Walker, Cartoon Church

Hello! I'm Ruth Moriarty, a Baptist minister doing some research into the Church Meeting and how we discern the mind of Christ together. I'm studying for a doctorate at the University of Chester. Today I will observe your Church Meeting and ask that you volunteer to be interviewed.

I'm also the minister of Christ Church New Southgate (Baptist/URC). I trained at Regent's Park College in 2003 and have pastored two Baptist churches previously: Woolwich Central and Poynton (near Manchester).

What is the project about?

This project is the first ever to look at how a Baptist Church Meeting make decisions. I hope that this research will provide good reasons for maintaining and celebrating Church Meetings as vital to Baptist identity.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

I'm really excited about my research! I hope that this research will keep our churches healthy and distinctively Baptist. For churches and individuals that take part, I hope that this project inspires you to think more deeply about the Church Meeting and that together the research will have a significant impact in the Baptist Union.

How will it work?

Four Baptist churches will be observed at a Church Meeting. A few weeks after, the minister and two individual church members will be interviewed at home or at the church as requested. The interviews will take an hour.

What will the interviews be about?

I will meet with those who wish to be interviewed and discuss these topics:

- Decision-making
- Prayer and spiritual wisdom
- Influence of powerful members or chair
- Silence of members
- Discernment and Baptist identity

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be given an information sheet to keep and asked to sign the consent form. With your permission, the interview will be audio-taped. You will be asked to adopt a pseudonym for reference in the research project.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All information that is collected about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential so that only the researcher carrying out the research will have access to such information. Your information will be securely stored and not kept beyond the period of study.

How do I volunteer?

Fill out the form attached and pass it to Ruth at the end of the meeting.

Ruth email/ tel no (XXXX)

Yes I'm happy to be interviewed about the Church Meeting

Name:

Address:

.....

Phone:

Email:

Thank you

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