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Living with Churches in the Borders: Mission and Ministry in Rural Scottish Parish Churches

Heather Joan Major

MTh

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Critical Studies
College of Arts
University of Glasgow

March 2022

Wordcount: 104,628

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ORCID: 0000-0003-1005-4865

Abstract

Is there a sustainable future for mission and ministry in rural Scottish parish churches?

In this thesis I use autoethnographic fieldwork within practical theology to understand and respond to the challenges and opportunities facing parish churches in rural contexts in Scotland.

My research investigates the lived realities of two rural parish churches in the Scottish Borders over twenty-seven months of immersive fieldwork. It engages with existing research on rural churches along with broader discussions of congregational studies, church renewal and missiology, recognising the dearth of existing research into rural Presbyterian churches in Scotland. Throughout my thesis I use a combination of ethnographic ‘thick’ description, autoethnographic reflexivity and critical theological reflection to evaluate the sustainability of current models of mission and ministry as a foundation for discussions of possibilities for the future.

My thesis acknowledges the unsustainability of traditional clergy dependent models of rural ministry and argues that a creative and sustainable future is possible if churches are willing to embrace a process of faithful change. I use the Five Marks of Mission as a framework for developing a rural missiology, arguing that rural parish churches have the potential to engage in embodied, creative missional practice as worshiping communities in rural Scotland. I conclude by addressing specific challenges facing the Church of Scotland in 2021, using the lens of rural experience to offer practical insight in looking towards the future.

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Acknowledgements

When I began the journey of walking with rural parish churches, I could never have imagined where that journey would take me. Along the way I have been entrusted with stories and learned to tell my own story in different ways.

Thank you to my supervisor Rev Dr Doug Gay for his wisdom, guidance and support throughout the complexities of my fieldwork and writing up. His patience and encouragement through the messiness of this research and the chaos of COVID-19 has made it possible for me to reach this point. I am beyond grateful. Thank you also to Rev Dr Alexander Forsyth for his creative enthusiasm and practical support during the first two years of my fieldwork and to Dr Anna Fisk for her feedback and support during the final stages of writing.

A special thank you goes to Crossbrae* Presbytery and Trinity College, University of Glasgow for their vision to create and support a PhD studentship looking at rural churches. Also, to the Church of Scotland for partnering with Crossbrae* and Trinity College in funding my research. Their combined support made my research possible.

My heartfelt thanks belong to the people of Braedubh* and Riverglebe* for sharing their lives with me and welcoming me into their communities. They trusted me with their stories and supported me through all my muddling attempts at understanding life in the Borders from their perspective. My life will be forever changed as a result of the time I spent with them.

Thank you to all the friends and family who have offered their support and encouragement through the practical and emotional challenges of the past four and a half years. In particular, to my crofties, thank you for reminding me that there is life beyond a computer screen, letting me be part of your families and making sure I was always welcomed with hugs. To Mum, Dad, Susan, Dave and Rora, thanks for being there through the years and cheering me over the finish line. To Norma, Beth, Louise, Kathy, Jo, Steve, Sarah, Viola, Geordie and the D&D group, thank you for praying for me and keeping me sane!

* I have used pseudonyms throughout to maintain the anonymity of participants.

Chapter 1 Borders and Boundaries: An Introduction

18/9/16

There is incredible beauty and blessing in the time spent appreciating the serenity of a garden in the early morning sunshine, with the steady crashing of the waves on the beach echoing across the fields. It is a necessary moment of calm and time for reflection before the beginning of the day. The enormity and significance of this research is particularly evident this morning. I may not physically move to the Borders until next month but there is no turning back now. I will forever be a factor in these churches and communities. What happens from here on will have an impact in all of our lives. It remains to be seen exactly what the effects will be, but it is safe to say none of us will remain unchanged.

This project is both exciting and scary for precisely that reason. Methodological considerations such as anonymity, confidentiality, ethical conduct, critical analysis and academic integrity are given a new meaning when I start thinking about meeting people with names, faces, stories, families, relationships and lives. These churches and villages are small communities. Any distinguishing features effectively eliminate anonymity. How do I guard against compromising the research while maintaining good relationships? Particularly if my findings are uncomfortable?

I will be living alongside these people for 3 years. I will have the privilege of sharing in their lives and churches. It is essential that I find the balance between critical analysis and loyalty to people, while maintaining academic and personal integrity.

This is my journey and my struggle.

It will be full of highs and lows, of celebrations and challenges, of joy and sadness, and of greetings and farewells.

This is my PhD. This is my life. What does the future hold?

1.1 Overview of Research

Borders and boundaries can represent many things. They can be geographical markers separating regions or countries, physical features such as rivers or

fences, ways of speaking about relational dynamics between people or psychological and emotional experiences, and even ways of describing times of transition or change. This thesis draws on many of these ideas as I consider what it means to live with churches in the borders, be that the physical location of the Scottish Borders or the borders that mark the place of the church in local communities or the liminality of change and development in churches at this time in history.

In early 2016 a small Scottish presbytery entered into a partnership with the University of Glasgow to offer a PhD studentship in Practical Theology, Rural Church and Mission. The brief was to spend an extended period with two case study churches in the Scottish Borders, carrying out ethnographic fieldwork and contributing to the life and ministry of both churches in an active capacity while investigating the reality of rural mission and ministry. Each parish church was linked with one or more neighbouring churches in a 'charge' or 'linkage', although I had limited contact with the linked churches, reflecting the restricted focus of my case study churches. The research was designed in three phases, beginning with a time of orientation and building rapport with church members and village residents, then moving into intentional investigation of specific themes and actively contributing to the development of mission and ministry in both churches before withdrawing from the field and churches to complete reflection and analysis for the final thesis.

This thesis represents a witness and testimony to a particular time, place and context, accompanying local people through the daily life of small parish churches in rural Scotland. It is, by its very nature, a limited representation based on my experiences of twenty-seven months of active fieldwork, carried out in dialogue with academic conversations about the Church of Scotland, rural ministry and mission in the United Kingdom, contextual and practical theology, and autoethnographic reflexivity. It records key moments and experiences that are indicative of the challenges and opportunities facing rural churches. Each chapter begins with an extract from my journals or reflections on my fieldwork, setting the scene for the chapter and grounding it in the lived reality of my research experience. The overarching structure of my thesis traces the process of carrying out my autoethnographic fieldwork and a developing discussion of creative, sustainable and contextual approaches to mission and ministry.

1.2 Research Question & Aims

The central question of my thesis is the result of an iterative process of participation, action and reflection, bringing together my fieldwork, discussion and academic engagement:

Is there a sustainable future for mission and ministry in rural Scottish parish churches? Using autoethnographic fieldwork within practical theology to understand and respond to the challenges and opportunities facing churches in rural contexts.

My research began with a general focus on the lived reality of mission and ministry in rural parish churches in the Scottish Borders, with a specific interest in the challenges and opportunities facing two case study churches, referred to in my thesis as Braedubh and Riverglebe.¹ Over twenty-seven months I lived alongside the people in the local area, participating in services, volunteering for committees and events, presenting reports on my reading and observations, facilitating discussions and initiating ecumenical gatherings of local churches. It quickly became clear that my research and the process of engaging relationally with people in the local area was a highly contextual and personal endeavour that demanded high levels of reflexivity and sensitivity.

As such, the stated and implied aims of my research and the process of fieldwork were as follows:

1. To participate fully in the life of case study churches and associated villages, contributing to services and events as appropriate.
2. To investigate, observe and reflect on the current situation and report findings to congregations, kirk sessions and presbytery.
3. To actively support and encourage the development of local mission and ministry.

¹ I use pseudonyms for each of the churches mentioned in my thesis. These pseudonyms provide a level of anonymity for participants, recognising their contributions while protecting their specific identities.

4. To facilitate discussions and develop contextually appropriate initiatives in consultation with local churches.
5. To make specific, practical and contextual recommendations for the future of mission and ministry in these churches and in the presbytery.

In addition, there are distinct aims for this thesis:

1. To record the process of developing and carrying out immersive autoethnographic fieldwork in rural parish churches.
2. To explore the realities of rural mission and ministry in Scotland as illustrated by two case studies.
3. To offer a perspective on the possibilities for sustainable approaches to rural mission and ministry in Scotland.
4. To contribute to the development and discussion of rural theology through contextualised practical application and reflection.

1.3 Defining Key Terms

There are specific terms and themes which shaped my fieldwork and analysis. Throughout my fieldwork and writing I discovered the limitations of language in describing ‘church’, ‘community’ and ‘rurality’. In this thesis, I use each term to indicate different aspects or highlight nuance in my perception and understanding of the local context. There is an inherent range of meaning for each term which reflects the complexity of my research.

1.3.1 Church

The term ‘church’ is open to a range of interpretations based on the presuppositions of those who use it, in addition to specific literary, socio-historical, cultural and theological contexts. When I refer to Braedubh or Riverglebe church, I am referring to the collective sociological and organisational entity within the local context of each respective village and the mindset of individuals. This may include perceptions of the ‘church’ which are

based on actions of individual ministers or church members as representatives of a corporate identity. Unless otherwise indicated by the context, when I use the noun ‘church’, I am referring to local churches as collective entities, reflecting the use of the word among my research participants. Where I discuss the overarching organisational or denominational structure of the Church of Scotland, I will use either ‘Church of Scotland’ or ‘CofS’.

When I refer to the people who attend church services, I generally use the term ‘congregation’ as a collective noun, unless I am making specific differentiation between regular attenders,² visitors, church members³ and those with leadership roles such as elders or ‘office bearers’. This reflects concepts of the ‘congregation’, defined by James Hopewell as ‘a group that possesses a special name and recognized members who assemble regularly to celebrate a more universally practiced worship but who communicate with each other sufficiently to develop intrinsic patterns of conduct, outlook and story.’⁴ If I am focusing on the use of the church building I will specifically mention the building. Likewise, where participants might refer to Sunday services as ‘church’, I will name the specific service or the act of ‘going to church’.

Within the broader field of practical theology ‘church’ can signify the local, regional or national organisation. It can refer to the people, or *ecclesia*, meaning the ecclesiastical body of believers. It may also be used to denote the ‘Church universal’ as the ‘Body of Christ’ operating across historical, cultural or geographical boundaries. In the latter chapters of my thesis, I use the term ‘church’ or ‘churches’ to address the theological responsibilities of local churches to engage with their local contexts as an embodied representation of Christian witness.

Related terms include ‘linkage’, ‘union’ or ‘charge’ whereby a single parish church is linked with one or more churches in different locations under the oversight of one primary minister. At the beginning of my fieldwork, Riverglebe

² These attenders may or may not be ‘members’ of the church in an official capacity.

³ Those who appear on the membership roll as communicant members, regardless of their patterns of attendance.

⁴ James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, ed. Barbara G. Wheeler, (London: SCM Press, 1988), pp. 12-13.

was united with the Kingriver parish congregation and the Kingriver building was closed, forming a 'union' that met for Sunday worship in the Riverglebe building. At the same time, the Kingriver and Riverglebe union was linked with Burnby parish church (a 'town' church) and two other small village churches under the oversight of a single minister and their associate as a collective parish 'charge'. Braedubh parish church was linked in a charge with the united congregations of Greyfield, Oxfield and Eastfield, which maintained church buildings and services in the villages of Greyfield and Oxfield.

1.3.2 Community

The term 'community' appears throughout my thesis and may alternately refer to a sense of community spirit or identity, relationships within a group of people or a description of the group itself; reflecting the language used by people who identify themselves as members of the community of Braedubh or Riverglebe. As Evelyn and James Whitehead note, 'the term [community] refers to a range of social forms, a variety of patterns of interaction and communication within groups.'⁵ While 'community' is a useful general term, it has limitations for distinguishing between those who are part of the 'church' and those who are not. The idea of multiple belonging, involving places, activities, events and groups of people, is reflected in my fieldwork.⁶ Many church members considered themselves part of several communities. They could live locally or in a neighbouring village, participating in community groups or activities in the village where the church building was situated as well as groups or societies in their place of residence. This complicates possible alternate terms such as 'villagers' or 'local residents'; however, I will specify which group I am referring to when using the term 'community' wherever possible.

1.3.3 Rural/Rurality

My two case study churches were selected by Crossbrae Presbytery as examples of 'rural' parish churches, by which they meant historic churches in small

⁵ Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *Community of Faith: Models and Strategies for Developing Christian Communities*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), p. 32.

⁶ David Walker, *God's Belongers: How People Engage with God Today and How the Church Can Help*, (Abingdon: BRF, 2017), pp. 18-28.

settlements with limited local amenities. Statistically, both Braedubh and Riverglebe are classified by the 2016 Scottish government Rural Urban Classification system as ‘Accessible Rural Areas’ because they are ‘areas with a population of less than 3,000 people, and within a drive time of 30 minutes to a Settlement of 10,000 or more.’⁷ Braedubh is a large village with dual socio-economic foundations in agriculture and industrial manufacturing. Riverglebe is a small village with strong agricultural ties to local farms and landowners.

In addition to geographic, socio-economic and historic aspects, rurality involves relationships and cultural mindsets which cannot be accurately represented by statistical analysis.⁸ Both Braedubh and Riverglebe have undergone significant social, cultural and demographic changes with the loss of local shops and amenities, an increase in holiday homes and an influx of retirees, ‘white settlers’ and commuters.⁹ I consider both Braedubh and Riverglebe to be ‘rural’ while recognising that they represent different types of rurality.

1.4 Methodological Approach

The project was conceived by Crossbrae Presbytery, who envisioned my role as both a researcher and initiator, actively working with local church leadership and membership in facilitating change based on my reading and reflections within the local context. As such, it required a balance between social constructivist and pragmatic epistemology. Methodologically, I prepared to engage ethnographically with both churches, using a form of Participatory Action Research (PAR), with theological reflection.¹⁰

In practice, I adopted a mixed method approach to researching rural mission and ministry, using autoethnographic fieldwork with multi-sensory participant

⁷ St Andrew’s House Scottish Government, ‘Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification’, accessed 22 September 2018, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-urban-rural-classification-2016/>

⁸ Michael Woods, *Rural*, (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1-15.

⁹ Changes which are reflected across rural Scotland. M. C. Jędrej and Mark Nuttall, *White Settlers: The Impact of Rural Repopulation in Scotland*, Reprint, (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 9-82.

¹⁰ Sara Kindon, Rachel Pain, and Mike Kesby, ‘Participatory Action Research: Origins, Approaches and Methods’, in *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place*, ed. Sara Kindon, Rachel Pain, and Mike Kesby, Routledge Studies in Human Geography 22, (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 9–18.

observation and action, influenced by and based in practical theology and Christian theological reflection. A pragmatic approach to my fieldwork allowed me to engage honestly with the lived reality of day-to-day life in the Borders, building my knowledge and awareness of the challenges facing rural ministry and mission in Braedubh and Riverglebe through personal experience and rapport with local people. The autoethnographic approach provided both the structure and freedom to focus on the particularity of the local culture, society, relationships, behaviour and attitudes, recognising the value of stories and experiences in generating theories about the future of mission and ministry in rural Scottish parish churches.

My initial research questions were based in my presuppositions about the importance of 'lay' involvement, discipleship, pastoral care and training, reflecting my personal biases and prior experiences in different denominations. As my fieldwork progressed, I found my focus changing as I spent time living among people for whom questions of sustainability and concern over the future of *their* church were of paramount importance. People who were unwilling to attend or participate in discussion groups or reflection activities were happy to talk with me informally, sharing their stories and perspectives in the course of daily life.

Turning to autoethnography and theological reflection gave me permission to write myself into my research, acknowledging the deeply personal nature of immersive fieldwork and the extent to which my presence changed the situation, dynamic and discussion around mission and ministry and the future of these churches. My methodological approach was explicitly theological, incorporating prayerful discernment and sensitivity to the local context with reflections on contextual theology, missiology and parallels with biblical narratives. Each stage of my fieldwork was influenced by an action-reflection cycle or spiral, whereby my experiences and observations provided direction to my questions and reflections, which, in turn, affected my actions.¹¹ My practical experiences of life and ministry in the Borders provided a foundation for engaging with secondary literature around mission and ministry, while my reading impacted my

¹¹ Paul H. Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*, (London: SPCK, 2006), pp. 81-95.

involvement in the churches, facilitating an iterative process of social constructivist and pragmatic epistemological discovery during the twenty-seven months of my fieldwork and subsequent years of reflexive writing.

1.5 Mapping My Thesis

The form and structure of my thesis is both narrative and intuitive. It follows the basic structure of my research and methodological approach, incorporating illustrative metaphors, extracts from my research journals and fieldnotes, narrative accounts of my experiences, personal reflections, biblical parallels and engagement with secondary sources and scholarship on mission and ministry in small churches, rural theology, contextuality and the future of the Church of Scotland. It is a layered account, echoing the messiness of autoethnographic multi-sensory participation and action; inviting readers to immerse themselves in the experience and consider their own response to the challenges and questions about the future of mission and ministry in rural Scottish parish churches.

1.5.1 Framing Metaphors

I use my fieldwork experiences and extracts from journal entries as vignettes, or metaphors, to frame each chapter. The introduction and conclusion use the imagery of borders and boundaries, simultaneously referring to the physical, ideological and temporal locations of my fieldwork, case study churches and research. The following images trace the progression of my research and reflections:

- **Joining the Conversation:** Comparing my literature review to my experience of arriving in a room where conversations are already underway and finding a gap or opportunity to contribute my voice.
- **Gathering Tools:** Using the image of a toolbox to illustrate the complexity of engaging in qualitative autoethnographic fieldwork in rural churches and villages.

- **Assembling the Jigsaw:** Providing the context and background for my fieldwork by comparing my role to working on a jigsaw puzzle as I introduce myself and my two case study locations.
- **Joining the Choir:** Illustrating the first eighteen months of my fieldwork in Braedubh and Riverglebe with stories of joining local choirs and participating in rehearsals to learn the repertoire and prepare for the concert.
- **Compere for the Day:** Using my experience as compere (or Master of Ceremonies) for a community gala event to illustrate my changing role in the local area from participant observer to facilitator and initiator in response to the needs of the context.
- **Reflexive Storytelling:** Reframing my experiences and reflections for the local churches and presbytery in the form of stories that illustrate the challenges and opportunities facing rural mission and ministry.
- **Prophetic Practice:** Taking the embodied practical experience of my fieldwork and using it to develop and apply a rural missiology for the future of mission and ministry in Scotland.

1.5.2 Chapter Overview

Chapter 2, 'Joining the Conversation', introduces some of the conversations and publications concerned with contextual practical theology, congregational studies, church growth, missiology, rurality, place and parish. I consider developments in rural theology and discussions about the future of rural churches, highlighting the lack of scholarship concerned with Scottish churches. I end the chapter by introducing my working definition of rural theology as a mode of practical theology with particular geographically related missional and contextual concerns.

Chapter 3, 'Gathering the Tools', traces the development of my methodological approach, engaging with literature around qualitative research and practical theology. I explore my reasons for choosing to adopt an autoethnographic approach to research and writing, grounding my fieldwork in participant

observation and action with Christian theological reflection. I discuss the emergence of multi-sensory, relational participation and reflexivity as my overarching approach to research. I highlight the significance of my personal hermeneutic lens as a practising Christian and my contribution and impact in the local context through my presence and involvement, articulating the need for rigorous reflexivity and evaluation of my role. I discuss the importance of an action-reflection cycle and present an overview of the practical phases of my fieldwork. I finish this chapter with a brief discussion of my approach to analysing and evaluating my research and thesis.

In Chapter 4, 'Assembling the Jigsaw', I use the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle to emphasize the need for a contextual frame for my fieldwork. I introduce myself and my background, articulating the factors that shape my hermeneutic lens, and explaining my position and role as a 'Mission Development Research Student'¹² and participant in the churches and villages. I describe the national, regional and local ecclesial contexts, providing a summary of the challenges facing churches in the area prior to the beginning of my research. This chapter provides the necessary expositional information to enable readers to imagine the contextual place and space of each church and myself as the researcher, offering a frame of reference for readers to interpret and evaluate my research based on the evidence of my thesis.

Chapter 5, 'Joining the Choir', uses my experience of local choirs as a metaphor for my multi-sensory and relational participation in the local context of churches and communities during my fieldwork. I focus on the regular practices of the local churches and people as a way of grounding my research in the tangible reality of everyday life. I share accounts of my experiences and the questions raised by my participation and reflections, drawing out common themes, images and emotions. I explore the relationships between church and community, and between churches, mapping social, spatial and affective aspects of church and community life. I discuss the key elements of my experiences, reflections, conversations and discussions with church and community members in relation to mission and ministry. This chapter records the development of my fieldwork and

¹² This label was assigned to me by a member of the local presbytery as I was introduced to the churches.

research foci on the sustainability of current models of mission and ministry, reflecting the breadth of questions and concerns raised by local people in relation to the future of 'their' parish church.

Chapter 6, 'Compere for the Day', uses my experience as compere for a local village gala day to illustrate the shift in my fieldwork from participant to active facilitator and initiator. Key elements of discussion concern seeing, listening and communicating. I describe and examine three key initiatives and the events or meetings that directly relate to each. This chapter includes reflections on my developing understanding of the challenges facing the churches and the complexity of relationships and situations within the local area. I also consider the significance of my changing role and the increased impact of my presence and involvement in the local area and how my experience of transitioning from 'incomer' to 'compere' might illustrate the role of the clergy in relation to ministry and mission.

Chapter 7, 'Reflexive Storytelling', uses the metaphor of a reflexive storyteller to record the final stage of my fieldwork; sharing my reflections, reports and recommendations with both churches and the local presbytery. As I engage reflexively with the stories of both churches and my experiences, I articulate an answer to my thesis question, recognising the limitations and unsustainability of current models of ministry while considering key areas of opportunity for developing contextually appropriate forms of mission and ministry. I adapt a local phrase and argue that 'aye been' must become 'could be' or it will be merely 'has been'. Based on my fieldwork I argue for the *potential* of sustainable mission and ministry, rooted in Christian theology, challenging current mindsets and approaches, and transforming practice. I include stories from neighbouring rural faith groups to illustrate different approaches to mission and ministry and their impact in congregations which embraced discipleship, team ministry, serving the community and corporate worship. This chapter addresses the particular situations of both case study churches and the local presbytery, recognising the contextuality and liminality of my research and the benefits of learning from storytelling.

In Chapter 8, 'Prophetic Practice: Developing a Practical Rural Missiology', I consider the theological and practical significance of my research beyond the

local context of my case study churches. I argue for an incarnational approach to rural missiology and I use the 'Five Marks of Mission' as a framing device for discussing the development of a missiology for rural parish churches in Scotland. I use the evidence of my fieldwork and the lived experience of my case study churches as a foundation for discussing key components of missiology from a rural perspective, arguing that rural parish churches have the potential to embody holistic, creative and contextual mission as worshipping communities in rural areas.

In Chapter 9, 'Prophetic Practice: Applying a Rural Missiology in Scotland', I acknowledge that traditional models and approaches to mission and ministry in rural Scotland are unsustainable. I argue it is necessary to embrace opportunities for creative change, providing seven recommendations for the future of mission and ministry in rural Scottish parish churches. Throughout this chapter, I draw on my research findings to address specific practical concerns within the Church of Scotland, offering a perspective on ways of encouraging the growth and revitalisation of the church's holistic, embodied Christian witness in rural Scotland.

My concluding chapter, 'Beyond Borders', offers a reflective epilogue on my research and thesis, reviewing the implications and impact of the research in the local churches and in my personal development. I reflect on my research journey through my guiding metaphors, identifying and assessing the challenges I encountered in carrying out my fieldwork and writing my thesis. I use this chapter to make recommendations for future research and highlight opportunities for dissemination over the coming months and years. I summarise my contribution to the field of research in rural theology and missiology and conclude with an exhortation for those involved in rural ministry and mission to embrace the possibilities of creative, sustainable and contextual approaches to being church in rural areas.

1.6 Context of Research: Church of Scotland

While a detailed history and overview of the Church of Scotland is beyond the purview of my thesis, a brief summary is required for orienting readers. The Church of Scotland is theologically Reformed and Presbyterian in structure and

polity, governed by courts of peers rather than a hierarchy of bishops. The Church of Scotland is governed in accordance with the *Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland* which affirms the foundation of faith, pre-eminence of the Word of God contained in the Old and New Testaments, adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith, commitment to territorial parish ministry, separation of church and state and intention to work with other churches for the furtherance of discipleship and the glory of God.¹³

At a local church level, a congregational board made up of members and elders addresses practical or financial matters, while a kirk session of elders is responsible for worship and pastoral care. The minister is the teaching elder, ordained to a ministry of Word and Sacrament, while the elders of the congregation are ordained as ‘ruling’ elders with responsibility for consistent spiritual oversight within the church.¹⁴ Representatives of local kirk sessions, usually the session clerk and minister, attend the regional presbytery meetings. The presbytery offers support and accountability for local churches, addressing concerns about practical and spiritual matters within the region. On a national level, the General Assembly meets annually to discuss matters such as policy, procedure, mission, ministry provision, training and so forth, supporting the work and witness of local, regional, national and international representatives of the Church of Scotland.

Each of the three courts is convened by a moderator, an elder or minister nominated and appointed by their peers and supported by additional representatives or convenors. At the General Assembly, the moderator is supported by staff from the national offices at 121 George Street in Edinburgh. These staff serve on various councils and committees, supporting the work of the Church of Scotland at every level, contributing to the generation of resources, management of buildings, guidance on legal matters and administrative requirements of a national organisation. Commonly referred to as ‘121’, these offices represent the organisational centre of the Church of Scotland.

¹³ Church of Scotland, ‘Church Constitution’, *The Church of Scotland*, 2010, accessed 12 March 2020, <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/church-law/church-constitution>.

¹⁴ Although this is the official structure, as my research shows there is significant discrepancy between this and the practical understanding of roles and responsibilities at a local level.

My research focuses on the Church of Scotland during a period of review and reform. Patterns of decline across churches in Scotland have been recorded and examined in recent publications such as *The Invisible Church, Growth Amidst Decline* and *Reforming the Kirk*.¹⁵ The local presbytery, Crossbrae,¹⁶ recognised the need for research addressing the challenges of ministry and possibilities of revitalisation in rural areas faced with long vacancies, aging and declining church membership, dwindling resources, old buildings, retiring clergy and reorganisation of churches with several linked united parishes under the charge of a sole minister. My thesis offers a perspective on the messy realities of churches in transition, recognising the complexities of human relationships and priorities, changing socio-economic patterns and the place of theological and missiological reflection in responding to the local context.

1.7 Researcher Bias and Impact

As an outsider and an incomer to both the Church of Scotland and the local area, I introduced a new dynamic in both churches and villages. My participation necessarily impacted my observations and my personality contributed to developing rapport and relationships with local people, while my background and perspective affected my interpretation of my experiences over the period of fieldwork. Throughout my research I have engaged in prayerful reflection and reflexive writing, striving to examine my hermeneutic lens and question my biases or assumptions. In Chapter 4 I introduce myself as an individual and researcher, recognising the extent to which my personal experiences and beliefs impact my research. In this section I briefly summarise my presuppositions and expectations about the Church of Scotland, my two case study churches, theological differences and approaching fieldwork in rural villages.

My basic understanding of the Church of Scotland and my expectations of the local churches were largely influenced by my previous experiences of living in the Highlands of Scotland. Based on my conversations with Crossbrae Presbytery

¹⁵ Steve Aisthorpe, *The Invisible Church: Learning from the Experiences of Churchless Christians*, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2016); P. W. Brierley, *Growth Amidst Decline: What the 2016 Scottish Church Census Revealed*, (Glasgow: Bell & Bain, 2017); Doug Gay, *Reforming the Kirk: The Future of the Church of Scotland*, (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Choosing to use a pseudonym for the presbytery adds another layer of anonymity for my participants.

and my experiences of small churches in times of transition, I expected the congregations to be small, elderly, overwhelmed by their circumstances and uncertain about the future but willing to change. I had some knowledge of Presbyterian governance and Scottish Church history and understood that local parish churches had a duty of care for the spiritual and pastoral needs of people living within their geographical parish boundaries. I was aware of tensions between different ministers and churches across the denomination regarding theological interpretations of Scripture and Christian practice and I anticipated potential conflicts within Crossbrae Presbytery.

I was unprepared for the extent of the contrast between my understanding of Christianity, faith development and mission and that of the local congregations. As a Christian with an extensive background in a variety of church traditions, I have constantly pursued authentic expressions of Christian faith and developed a conviction of the validity of Christian mission and ministry. This impacted my interactions with the people of Braedubh and Riverglebe as I responded to their questions about my perspective on Christianity, the church, the biblical narratives, faith and the purpose or meaning of life. I was regularly challenged to find accessible ways to express theological concepts which were unfamiliar to people regardless of their church association. As my fieldwork progressed, I found myself appreciating the challenges and opportunities of bringing together diverse theological backgrounds and experiences in geographical parish ministry.

I adopted a relational approach to living in the rural village of Braedubh and interacting with the residents of Riverglebe. My experience of rural life in the Highlands taught me to expect complex socio-historical, cultural and familial relationships. I expected to spend several months learning about the interwoven networks within the local villages and the wider area, gradually becoming acquainted with people and places I heard discussed as I spent time engaging in day-to-day activities. I anticipated curious questions about my presence and recognised that I would become a topic of conversation. As I lived alongside local people, I found that sharing my life stories established rapport and contributed to developing trust as my role and position changed from one of 'suspicious stranger' to one of 'trusted friend'.

Over the months of my fieldwork I became more actively involved in leading initiatives or contributing to the development of new enterprises. This, in turn, placed me in a position of influence as a ‘trusted advisor’ or ‘advocate’ as people approached me with their concerns or frustrations about the church. While I have worked to ensure my thesis reflects my experience and my contributions, clearly indicating my perspective and hermeneutic lens to mitigate unintentional bias, my presence in the local churches and communities influenced aspects of the local context and dynamic from my first encounter with the people and practices.

1.8 Conclusion: Envisioning the Future of Mission and Ministry in Rural Scottish Parish Churches

My thesis presents my perspective and experience of life and ministry in two case study churches during a particular time. Each church underwent significant transitions in leadership and elements of practice during my fieldwork. My fieldwork highlights the unsustainability of current models of mission and ministry and the lack of training or support for church members, contributing to a sense of insecurity and anxiety about the future. The evidence indicates *possibilities* for Christian witness and engagement with individuals and communities but demonstrates little quantifiable growth. My reflections and recommendations are therefore contextual and liminal. They are prophetic, calling churches to faithful action for the glory of God, and practical, based on the lived reality of my case studies.¹⁷

In looking ahead to the *potential* for a creative and sustainable future in rural mission and ministry, I am arguing for the need to reflect on the lived experience of individuals and churches, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in seeing the ways God is working within local people and places. By encouraging intentional engagement with discipleship and training for every church member, I echo voices of the past in calling for a holistic approach to mission and ministry that involves the whole body of the church. I argue for a transformation of ordained ministry to reflect the need for clergy to act as

¹⁷ Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 154-85.

facilitators, trainers, equippers and mentors as they accompany churches and church members through discipleship and discovery. I argue that a sustainable future for the Church of Scotland involves intentional restoration of parish ministry and mission, engaging with local people and communities in building relationships, mutual respect and communication. This includes recovering an understanding of the purpose of mission and ministry, recognising the good news of God's love and salvation is for all, not simply those who attend Sunday services. My thesis concludes that a dynamic and sustainable future for mission and ministry in the rural and semi-rural churches in Scotland is possible, but it will require change, humility and grace as we work together to love and serve God and each other.

Chapter 2 Joining the Conversation: From Biblical Studies to Contextual Practical Theology

As I enter the building I hear a buzz of conversation. I'm trying to find my way through unfamiliar corridors to the room where the party is in progress. I've been invited to this party, but I have yet to meet any of the other guests. I am feeling intimidated and overwhelmed. I will be an outsider and stranger in a room full of people who already know each other.

How will I find my way through the room? Will there be anyone I will be comfortable speaking to? Will I be able to join in the conversations or just be a wallflower until someone comes and speaks to me? How will I know when to speak up? Do I have anything worth saying? All these thoughts run through my head as I turn the handle to open the door.

The door swings wide and the time of reckoning has come.

I enter the room, looking for a place to stand where I will not be in the way. These first moments give me time to breathe and calm my nerves. After all, it is a party, not a lions' den. I am here to meet people, have conversations and begin to understand what is important in this group. As time goes on, I will be able to offer my contribution, but for now I just need to keep my eyes and ears open.

The beginning of my research journey paralleled the experience of attempting to join in an existing conversation. I was a newcomer to the field of practical theology, exploring a rich diversity of extant scholarship while engaging in an iterative process of discovery and reflection in my fieldwork. In this chapter, I review relevant literature and existing scholarship, highlighting the lack of research about rural parish churches in Scotland. I examine literature related to contextual theology, congregational studies, church growth and renewal, missiology, rurality, place and parish. This includes examining a selection of the existing resources which have been developed to support mission and ministry in rural areas within the United Kingdom. I conclude by presenting my working definition of rural theology, arguing that a storied autoethnographic description and analysis of two parish churches in rural Scotland provides significant insight into understanding national issues in rural mission and ministry.

2.1 Contextual Practical Theology

Stephen Bevans argues that ‘there is no such thing as “theology”’ because every expression of Christian faith is grounded in a particular context.¹⁸ Therefore, the context of human experience, such as culture, history, societal norms and relationships, should be brought alongside scripture and tradition as a recognised and valid source for theology.¹⁹ Bevans’ *Models of Contextual Theology* remains influential, presenting a detailed overview of six models for those who are willing to engage with the ‘theological imperative’ of contextualisation: anthropological, transcendental, praxis, synthetic, translation and countercultural.²⁰

Robert J. Schreiter’s treatment of the importance of context focuses on the idea of ‘local theology’ which allows the voice of the local church to be heard.²¹ Schreiter’s discussion is oriented towards missiology, providing guidance for those engaging in cross-cultural evangelism and local church ministry in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). He advocates listening to local culture alongside inherited church traditions.²² According to Schreiter, the interplay between local understandings of theology and church tradition is essential for recognising or facilitating a dialogue about Christian faith and identity.²³

According to Angie Pears, contextual theology ‘*explicitly* places the recognition of contextual nature of theology at the forefront of the theological process.’²⁴ In Pears’ considered and thorough investigation and analysis of contextual theology, she identifies the importance of missiology in relation to contextual theology, recognising the mutual development of each as they inform each

¹⁸ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Revised and expanded ed., Faith and Cultures Series, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 3.

¹⁹ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 4.

²⁰ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, pp. 15, 28-33.

²¹ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 10th ed., (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 6.

²² Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, pp. 39-74, 95-121.

²³ Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, pp. 117-21.

²⁴ Angela Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 1. Emphasis original.

other.²⁵ Her critique of liberation theologies and post-colonial theologies issues a challenge to proponents of particular theologies which have adopted exclusivist and narrow understandings of context. She encourages practical theologians to engage in reflexive listening to ‘voices of concern’ so they might respond well to the changing and adapting nature of their contexts and the broader world.²⁶

There is significant overlap between the fields of contextual theology and practical theology, as illustrated in Paul Ballard and John Pritchard’s 1996 book *Practical Theology and Action* (revised in 2006).²⁷ Their analysis of the changing nature of practical theology traces the influence of contextualisation and the necessity of engaging in a cycle of intentional theological reflection and action in the local context.²⁸ This underpins recent developments in carrying out contextual theological reflection within church congregations and small groups in the UK, such as Laurie Green’s *Let’s Do Theology* and the Action Research: Church and Society Project (ACRS) recorded in *Talking About God in Practice* by Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins.²⁹ In each case, theory informs action, which informs reflection and the development of new theories which can then be put into practice, continuing the cycle.

Pete Ward’s *Participation and Mediation* (2008), reframes practical theology within the context and culture of a ‘liquid’ church:

Participation refers both to a communion in the divine life and to a sharing in the cultural expression of the Church. Mediation relates to the way that expression becomes a place of divine indwelling and presence through the operation of various forms and processes of cultural communication. It is this element of divine indwelling as it is mediated in cultural and theological expression that transforms

²⁵ Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology*, p. 10.

²⁶ Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology*, pp. 170-71.

²⁷ Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*.

²⁸ Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, pp. 1-7.

²⁹ Laurie Green, *Let’s Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology*, revised ed, (London; New York: Mowbray, 2009), pp. 17-38; Helen Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*, (London: SCM, 2010), pp. 18-33.

practical theology from a distanced or uncommitted academic practice into a spiritual discipline.³⁰

Ward combines practical theology, missiology and culture studies into a three-phase cycle for analysing elements of church life and practice: production, representation and audience.³¹ For Ward, the calling of a contextual theologian involves interpretation, reflexivity and engagement in culture.

2.2 Congregational/Local Church Studies in the UK

The calling of a contextual theologian is consistent with James Hopewell's 1988 *Congregation*, where he argues for the necessity of interpreting congregations, whereby the narrative idiom provides insight into the evocative 'being', characterisation and confession of identity and ministry in a local church community.³² Hopewell's ethnographic approach to studying congregations is influenced by Clifford Geertz, leading Hopewell to see the 'local church [as] a microcosm of human culture.'³³ He argues that examining the stories of congregational life in its particular socio-historical and cultural setting enables the collective church community to understand itself, addressing areas of embarrassment and increasing the likelihood of engaging in meaningful ministry and mission in the future.³⁴ He extends the study of the congregation to include the congregation's worldview and the place of the church in the parish.³⁵

The essays gathered by Matthew Guest, Karin Tusting and Linda Woodhead in *Congregational Studies in the UK* (2004) represent Hopewell's legacy, adopted by British scholars and applied in specific, local, contextual and culturally sensitive approaches to studying the unique subcultures and narratives of churches in the UK.³⁶ In *Studying Local Churches* (2005), edited by Helen Cameron, Philip Richter, Douglas Davies and Frances Ward, the editors reframe

³⁰ Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church*, (London: SCM Press, 2008), pp. 95-96.

³¹ Ward, *Participation and Mediation*, p. 80.

³² Hopewell, *Congregation*, pp. 193-201.

³³ Hopewell, *Congregation*, p. 10.

³⁴ Hopewell, *Congregation*, pp. 9-12.

³⁵ Hopewell, *Congregation*, pp. 67-100.

³⁶ Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting, and Linda Woodhead, eds., *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

the discussion for a UK context by using the term ‘local church’ rather than ‘congregational studies’.³⁷ This allows for more complex and nuanced studies of the UK context, encompassing all aspects of church ministry and association. *Studying Local Churches* presents an overview of the four disciplines that contribute to the field of congregational studies in the UK: anthropology, sociology, organizational studies and theology.³⁸ *Studying Local Churches* offers a significant contribution to the field by presenting a practical reference guide of essays and worked examples by British scholars, encouraging researchers to engage with all aspects of contextual congregational studies.

Significant examples of congregational studies in the UK include Al Dowie’s 1997 PhD research in a prominent Church of Scotland congregation in Glasgow which approaches congregational interpretation through a combination of participant observation and interviews with congregants, interpreted in light of pastoral theology.³⁹ Dowie’s conclusions focus on congregational culture, micro-politics, status economics and the inherent challenges for de-centring the mission and ministry of the church.⁴⁰ Abby Day’s *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen* (2017), presents an ethnographic account of the ‘every day’ lives of Generation A – women born in the 1920s and early 1930s– who are rightly considered to be the ‘backbone of the church’, arguing their contribution has been overlooked in discussions about church culture and the future of religion in Britain.⁴¹ According to Day, the ‘invisible work of Generation A in keeping churches open and breathing is critical to sustaining their lives and the lives of the church.’⁴² She concludes the passing of Generation A will fundamentally change the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion as succeeding generations fail to

³⁷ Helen Cameron et al., eds., *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook*, (London: SCM Press, 2005), p. 5.

³⁸ Each of the four editors contributes a short summary of their discipline and methodological approach to studying rural churches. Cameron et al., eds., *Studying Local Churches*, pp. 12-26.

³⁹ Al Dowie, ‘Interpreting Culture in a Scottish Congregation: An Ethnographic and Theological Approach’, (University of Edinburgh, 1997).

⁴⁰ Dowie, ‘Interpreting Culture in a Scottish Congregation’, pp. 332-336.

⁴¹ Abby Day, *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen: The Last Active Anglican Generation*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 3-9.

⁴² Day, *Religious Lives of Older Laywomen*, p. 193.

engage in regular practices of service within the everyday life of local churches.⁴³

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead's 2005 study of the 'congregational domain' and 'holistic milieu' extrapolates from the evidence and data gathered in Kendal to consider the future of religion and spirituality in Britain.⁴⁴ When read in conjunction with the 2015 revised edition of Grace Davie's 1994 book *Religion in Britain*, it becomes clear that the religious landscape of Britain is paradoxical.⁴⁵ As Davie notes, 'the centre of British society is gradually drifting away from Christianity, but remains deeply coloured by it.'⁴⁶ In her chapter on 'Cultural Heritage, Believing without Belonging and Vicarious Religion', Davie observes an ongoing societal expectation that churches, church leaders and congregations have a public role or function, serving the religious needs of a local population.⁴⁷ Therefore, in the midst of an increasingly pluralistic faith context, local churches continue to have an element of influence.

2.3 Church Growth and Renewal

Alongside congregational studies there is a wealth of literature addressing church growth and renewal, particularly in relation to fresh expressions of church.⁴⁸ Across the field there are dominant themes of relationality, creativity, spirituality and responding to local contexts in changing times. There is tension between traditional or inherited models of church and new church plants or fresh expressions of ministry, but there is a common emphasis on mission as the foundational calling and purpose of the Church

⁴³ Day, *Religious Lives of Older Laywomen*, pp. 22-23, 192-97.

⁴⁴ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World, (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 129-50.

⁴⁵ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, 2nd ed., (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 221-36.

⁴⁶ Davie, *Religion in Britain*, p. 223.

⁴⁷ Davie, *Religion in Britain*, pp. 71-90.

⁴⁸ The Fresh Expressions movement was formalised in 2004 in response to the 'Mission Shaped Church' report for the Church of England. Fresh Expressions are defined as 'new forms of church that emerge within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those who "don't go to church."' Fresh Expressions, 'What Is a Fresh Expression?', accessed 22 May 2020, <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/about/what-is-a-fresh-expression/>.

John Drane's *The McDonaldization of the Church* (2000), addresses what he sees as the commodification and reduction of the Church to a rationalized system of practices and procedures that no longer meet the requirements of changing society.⁴⁹ In Drane's view, the combination of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control have created an iron cage, effectively restraining the Church from engaging in meaningful spiritual transformation.⁵⁰ In short, Drane argues 'we have ended up with a secular Church in a spiritual society.'⁵¹ Drane does not offer a guide or model for churches that are looking to leave behind McDonaldization but rather, he challenges Christian churches to become transformational worshiping communities that are incarnational, functioning as the body of Christ in the world.⁵²

Robert Warren's *The Healthy Churches' Handbook* (2004) provides practical guidance for churches that are assessing their strengths, weaknesses and possibilities for the future of their church.⁵³ He offers seven marks to identify healthy churches:

1. Energized by faith.
2. Outward-looking focus.
3. Seeks to find out what God wants.
4. Faces the cost of change and growth.
5. Operates as a community.
6. Makes room for all.
7. Does a few things and does them well.⁵⁴

In addition to analysing these marks, Warren uses the metaphor of a pilgrimage journey to offer practical advice to churches that want to become healthy.⁵⁵ He emphasises the importance of discipleship and suggests churches work with a facilitator who can offer an external perspective while offering support and accountability through the process. Warren's approach to church renewal is

⁴⁹ John William Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity, and the Future of the Church*, Reprint, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005), pp. 28-33.

⁵⁰ Drane, *McDonaldization of the Church*, pp. 34-54.

⁵¹ Drane, *McDonaldization of the Church*, p. 54.

⁵² Drane, *McDonaldization of the Church*, pp. 155-82.

⁵³ Robert Warren, *The Healthy Churches' Handbook: A Process for Revitalizing Your Church*, (London: Church House, 2004).

⁵⁴ Warren, *Healthy Churches' Handbook*, p. vii.

⁵⁵ Warren, *Healthy Churches' Handbook*, pp. 51-79.

driven by his definition of ‘church’ as a community of faith and action.⁵⁶ As a result, the marks and process he advocates can be applied in both inherited models and fresh expressions of church.

Keith Elford’s *Creating the Future of the Church* (2013) addresses the question of church revitalisation and renewal through the lens of organizational development.⁵⁷ He begins with a ‘Trialogue’ where viable organizations simultaneously ‘manage the present’ of everyday activities and responsibilities while ‘creating the future’ by asking how they can change or adapt to meet upcoming needs or opportunities and ‘nurturing [their] identity’ as the means of evaluating changes and choices.⁵⁸ This forms the basis of a process of renewal, which requires good leadership, teambuilding, commitment, communication and engagement.

2.3.1 Leadership

Questions of leadership and team development form the foundation of Steve Taylor’s *Built for Change* (2016), which offers a practical theology for collaborative innovation.⁵⁹ Based on 1 Corinthians 3 and 4, Taylor identifies six images of leadership: servants who ‘act by listening’, resource managers who ‘face reality’, builders who ‘structure collaborative processes’, gardeners who ‘plant diversity’, fools who ‘jump out of boxes’ or ‘play’, and parents who ‘parent’.⁶⁰ Taylor uses stories of innovation and collaboration to illustrate the ways in which different styles of leadership and team development can work together to respond to different contextual opportunities. Taylor makes an important observation that,

Creativity is not innovation. Creativity is the spark that ignites the idea. Innovation is the process by which the idea becomes a reality.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Warren, *Healthy Churches’ Handbook*, p. 85.

⁵⁷ Keith Elford, *Creating the Future of the Church: A Practical Guide to Addressing Whole-System Change*, (London: SPCK, 2013), pp. xi-xvi.

⁵⁸ Elford, *Creating the Future*, pp. 21-25.

⁵⁹ Steve Taylor, *Built for Change: A Practical Theology of Innovation and Collaboration in Leadership*, (Unley: MediaCom Education Inc., 2016).

⁶⁰ Taylor, *Built for Change*, pp. 23-38.

⁶¹ Taylor, *Built for Change*, p. 161.

In order to realise the innovative potential of an idea, Taylor highlights the types of questions that each of the six types of leaders need to consider:⁶²

Servant	What am I hearing that is surprising?
Gardener	What can I plant that is not yet here?
Builder	What is the next step?
Resource manager	What does this organisation have that is not being fully utilised?
Fool	What unexpected act could add value?
Parent	What feedback do I need to hear?

In doing so, Taylor offers useful guidance for teams made up of people who operate in one or more of the six categories while affirming the value of diverse leadership styles.

Vaughan Roberts and David Sims' *Leading by Story* (2017) adopts an approach to leadership that resonates with James Hopewell's thesis on the narrative structure of churches.⁶³ Rather than thinking of leadership as a 'role', Roberts and Sims propose that church leadership should be understood as an action.⁶⁴ Agreeing with Taylor, Roberts and Sims argue that 'effective leadership relies on a collaboration between several different people with different qualities.'⁶⁵ They advocate an approach to leadership that reflects the way stories are shared by groups and individuals which acts as a helpful counterpoint to the idea of the 'heroic leader'.⁶⁶ Instead, leading by story is primarily relational, reflecting the reality that 'human beings live out storied lives' and contribute to collective stories as communities.⁶⁷ Additionally, 'leading by story and storying the leading' offers opportunities to relinquish hierarchical control and grand-scale accomplishment mindsets by leaving space for celebrating every contribution to the collective story.⁶⁸ Roberts and Sims' approach is rooted in generosity and

⁶² Taylor, *Built for Change*, p. 174.

⁶³ Vaughan Roberts and David Sims, *Leading by Story: Rethinking Church Leadership*, (London: SCM Press, 2017).

⁶⁴ Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 23.

⁶⁷ Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 23.

⁶⁸ Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, pp. 23-39.

humility because it is not about status, power or control, rather ‘leading needs to involve enabling people to tell their stories, hearing the stories that are being told, and enabling others to hear the stories too.’⁶⁹

2.3.2 Fresh Expressions

The *Mission-shaped Church* report, published in 2004, prioritises church planting and finding fresh ways for existing Church of England churches to engage with the local community.⁷⁰ Since its initial publication, the report has inspired a series of practical reforms and further publications, each reflecting an element of contextuality or addressing perceived shortcomings.⁷¹ One such short-coming is the lack of engagement with rural areas, limited to three pages wherein the report provides a generalised overview of possible opportunities and challenges for Fresh Expressions and local churches.⁷² In response to the justified criticism that *Mission-shaped Church* neglects the rural context, Sally Gaze’s *Mission-shaped and Rural* (2011) reframes the discussion for the context of rural people and places. She addresses the missional foundations of ‘incarnation’ and ‘dying to live’⁷³ alongside the need for cultural sensitivity.⁷⁴ By describing and defending rural Fresh Expressions of church alongside traditional parish churches, she reinforces the necessity and potential for a ‘mixed economy’ of churches working together for the Kingdom.⁷⁵

The ‘mixed economy’ approach to local churches is one of the subjects of Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank’s *For the Parish* (2010), which offers a theological and philosophical critique of the Fresh Expressions movement in the Church of England.⁷⁶ In doing so, they address questions of segregation and

⁶⁹ Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, p. 199.

⁷⁰ Graham Cray, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context*, Mission and Public Affairs, (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), pp. 6-7, 145-49.

⁷¹ See below for discussion of John Hull’s theological critique.

⁷² Cray, *Mission-Shaped Church*, pp. 118-120.

⁷³ Sally Gaze, *Mission-Shaped and Rural: Growing Churches in the Countryside*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2011), pp. 8-13.

⁷⁴ Gaze, *Mission-Shaped and Rural*, pp. 15-49.

⁷⁵ Gaze, *Mission-Shaped and Rural*, pp. 102-8.

⁷⁶ Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions*, (London: SCM Press, 2010), pp. vii-xi.

conflict between the inherited parish system and advocates of Fresh Expressions. In their critique, they challenge the pervasive characterisation that local parish churches are problematic and no longer fit for the purpose of engaging missionally in their local contexts. In their impassioned defence of local parish ministry, they champion the possibilities represented in local churches as places where people are gathered based on geographical boundaries rather than separated into homogenous special interest groups. They argue there is potential for parishes and Fresh Expressions to work together in mutually beneficial ways, where the parish church provides a community for training and discipleship, equipping those engaged in missional communities.⁷⁷

Michael Moynagh's considerable contributions to literature on church life and renewal address the challenges of post-modern society and examines ways in which churches might respond, emphasising opportunities for churches to engage in practical approaches to transformational discipleship, worship and mission in their local context. In *Changing World, Changing Church* (2001), Moynagh uses stories from real people and places to advocate for a radical change in the way churches function. He urges churches to change the 'you come to us' mentality and embrace the 'we'll come to you' mission opportunities for building faith communities, or congregations, wherever, and whenever, people are living and working.⁷⁸ In *Emergingchurch.Intro* (2004), Moynagh presents an overview of emerging churches, by which he means forms of Christian church communities that are specifically missional and oriented towards non-churchgoers, although he acknowledges that they have the potential to transform regular churchgoers and traditional churches.⁷⁹

In *Church for Every Context* (2012), Moynagh attempts to describe and identify the key components of what he terms new contextual churches. Such churches may appear in a variety of forms but they will be: Missional – Christian outreach among people who are not regular churchgoers; Contextual – serving the needs of people and places; Formational – primarily concerned with discipleship; and

⁷⁷ Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, p. 227.

⁷⁸ Michael Moynagh, *Changing World, Changing Church: New Forms of Church, out-of-the-Pew Thinking, Initiatives That Work*, Reprint, (London: Monarch Books, 2003), pp. 188-90.

⁷⁹ Michael Moynagh, *Emergingchurch.Intro: Fresh Expressions of Church, Examples That Work, the Big Picture, What You Can Do*, (Oxford; Grand Rapids: Monarch, 2004), pp. 9-33.

Ecclesial – becoming church for the people who attend.⁸⁰ By highlighting these four elements, Moynagh addresses the limitations of language and perception for emerging churches and Fresh Expressions in local communities, enabling Christian churches to embrace missional opportunities in their own contexts. *Being Church, Doing Life* (2014) develops this further by offering seven reasons why witnessing communities are the way forward for Christian churches:

- God does mission through community.
- Witnessing communities connect the church to people.
- They re-energize the local church.
- They support everyday discipleship.
- They serve other people.
- They are practical for everyday Christians.
- Mission is a first step for God and should be for us.⁸¹

Moynagh's most significant recent contribution to the ongoing conversation around church growth and renewal is *Church in Life* (2017). He builds on his previous work by presenting a detailed and comprehensive theological and missiological framework for engaging with emerging ecclesial communities and traditional models of local church. He adopts a three-part process of seeing, judging and acting: looking at the innovations of emerging ecclesial communities, judging their theological foundations and identity, and encouraging churches and teams of Christians to engage with missional innovation.⁸² Moynagh advocates a theological reimagining of 'local church' and, in doing so, attempts to bridge the gap between inherited models of church and emerging ecclesial communities.⁸³ He argues that churches can be defined in 'four interlocking sets of relationships: directly with God, the wider church, the world and within the fellowship, all centred on Jesus.'⁸⁴ For Moynagh, the goal of church multiplication and mission is about releasing people to participate in

⁸⁰ Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice*, (London: SCM Press, 2012), p. xiv.

⁸¹ Michael Moynagh, *Being Church, Doing Life: Creating Gospel Communities Where Life Happens*, (Oxford; Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2014), p. 85.

⁸² Michael Moynagh, *Church in Life: Innovation, Mission and Ecclesiology*, (London: SCM Press, 2017), p. 15.

⁸³ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, pp. 179-98.

⁸⁴ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, p. 254.

the kingdom work of Christ in innovative ways rather than attempting to control the outcome.⁸⁵

Steve Aisthorpe's books are notable recent additions to the growing body of literature on church growth and renewal, particularly because they are rare examples of studies based on the contextual situation in Scotland rather than the Church of England. Aisthorpe's discussion of churchless Christians in *The Invisible Church* (2016) offers persuasive arguments for interpreting 'church decline' in terms of 'transition', inviting local churches to respond creatively and engage with the people in their communities.⁸⁶ For Aisthorpe, this involves a shift from maintaining traditional church events and activities to engaging in relational discipleship and mission, gathering together as organic worshipping communities of faith rather than institutions.⁸⁷ This forms the basis of *Rewilding the Church* (2020), where he encourages the Christian Church as a whole to embrace the freedom of responding to contextual and relational opportunities without striving to control the form or outcomes.⁸⁸ This includes a move away from traditionalism, but without rejecting tradition.⁸⁹ For Aisthorpe this means diversity, connectivity, creativity and flexibility as churches reflect the Body of Christ.

2.4 Mission and Purpose of 'Church'

Among theologians, clergy and church practitioners, the concept of *mission* is often understood as the *missio Dei* or Mission of God, which includes all aspects of God's involvement with creation, including humankind. J. Andrew Kirk argues that mission in this sense is fulfilled and inseparable from the character, love and rule of God.⁹⁰ The term '*missio ecclesiae*' denotes the work and purpose of the Church as it bears witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁹¹ As Craig Ott

⁸⁵ Moynagh, *Church in Life*, pp. 414-15.

⁸⁶ Aisthorpe, *The Invisible Church*, pp. 185-205.

⁸⁷ Aisthorpe, *The Invisible Church*, p. 202.

⁸⁸ Steve Aisthorpe, *Rewilding the Church*, (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2020), pp. 1-27.

⁸⁹ Aisthorpe, *Rewilding the Church*, pp. 156-79.

⁹⁰ J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), pp. 25-30.

⁹¹ Kirk, *What is Mission?*, pp. 30-31.

observes, early links between *missio ecclesiae* and *missio Dei* led to confusion over the precise role of the church in mission.⁹² According to Christopher Wright, there is a cultural perception of ‘mission’ or ‘missions’ in church culture which implies human action and is often dissociated from the primary calling and vision of the church.⁹³ Wright prefers the following definition for mission:

Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation.⁹⁴

This definition changes the focus of mission from a project or plan to an all-encompassing vision for Christian churches in response to God’s calling.

As David Bosch notes, it is essential to distinguish between the singular idea of *mission* and the plural idea of *missions*.⁹⁵ For Bosch, the *missiones ecclesiae* are the ways in which the church participates in the *missio Dei* in particular contexts. In *Transforming Mission* (1991), Bosch addresses the ‘pluriverse’⁹⁶ of missiology by tracing historical developments and perspectives on mission. He argues that definitions and conceptions of mission are fluid and everchanging before concluding that, ‘transforming mission means both that mission is to be understood as an activity that transforms reality and that there is a constant need for mission to be transformed.’⁹⁷ He encourages the ‘church-in-mission’ to embrace an understanding of the multidimensional *missio Dei* in terms of the Christological ‘salvific events’ of the New Testament: the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost and *parousia*.⁹⁸ As a result, the missionary endeavours of the church should be understood as human attempts to participate in the *missio Dei* rather than interpreted as mission itself. There is

⁹² Craig Ott, ‘Introduction’, in *The Mission of the Church: Five Views in Conversation*, ed. Craig Ott, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), p. xiv.

⁹³ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2006), pp. 22-23.

⁹⁴ Wright, *Mission of God*, pp. 22-23.

⁹⁵ David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 16, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 10.

⁹⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 7.

⁹⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 523.

⁹⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 524-30.

no prescriptive way to engage in the *missio Dei*, which is the ultimate origin and purifier of the Church.⁹⁹

Distinguishing between *missiones ecclesiae* and the *missio Dei* is the foundation of John Hull's theological response to *Mission-Shaped Church* in which he affirms the practical recommendations while addressing significant points of difficulty with the theological framework of the report, most notably the disconnect between the report's espoused theology of shaping the church through mission and its operant theology of shaping mission through the church.¹⁰⁰ This stands in direct contrast to the pair of statements found at the end of chapter 6 in *Mission-shaped Church*:

Start with the Church and the mission will probably get lost.
Start with mission and it is likely that the Church will be found.¹⁰¹

In *Mission-Shaped and Rural*, Sally Gaze begins with a chapter addressing the question of mission-shaped church or church-shaped mission, acknowledging challenge of letting go of concepts of 'church' in order to focus on the *missio Dei*.¹⁰² This is further developed by Alan Smith in *God-Shaped Mission* (2008), where he appeals for critical theological reflection and engagement with the rural context.¹⁰³ As he rightly notes, many churches are preoccupied with maintaining existing forms and traditions or they are rushing to introduce new ideas and activities rather than taking time to listen, learn, act and refocus.¹⁰⁴ For Smith, the primary challenge for the Church in local areas is to refocus on God and reflect that in the way they engage with the community.¹⁰⁵ This is consistent with what Henning Wrogemann refers to as the 'Doxological Dimension' where 'mission can be defined as the glorification of God through the life witness of creatures reconciled, redeemed, and liberated by God, which

⁹⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 531.

¹⁰⁰ John M. Hull, *Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response*, (London: SCM Press, 2006), p. 31.

¹⁰¹ Cray, *Mission-shaped Church*, p. 124.

¹⁰² Gaze, *Mission-Shaped and Rural*, pp. 1-14.

¹⁰³ Alan Smith, *God-Shaped Mission: Theological and Practical Perspectives from the Rural Church*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008).

¹⁰⁴ Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, pp. 143-203.

¹⁰⁵ Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, pp. 189-90.

radiates out into the world through the increase of doxology.’¹⁰⁶ For Wrogemann, every action of the church which is rooted in doxology will further the *missio Dei*.

2.5 Rural Theology

This visit to the library at Queen’s Foundation, Birmingham makes me smile. As I walk in and look for a space to work quietly, away from distractions, I notice the guide to the library collection. It is the first library I have seen that lists ‘rural theology’ as a separate category, albeit a small one. The books gathered under the classification occupy half of a shelf, positioned handily between books on Congregational Studies and others on Church Renewal. It is a visual reminder that my thesis needs to incorporate all three strands.

Rather than defining rural theology, the Rural Theology Association, which publishes the *Rural Theology* journal, merely states their belief that ‘theology matters and [they encourage] theological thinking on the future of rural churches and on matters of importance to life in rural communities.’¹⁰⁷ Their strapline ‘Christian faith in the UK countryside – Rural God Talk’ implies but does not develop a definition. As a result, there is little cohesion among theologians and researchers concerned with the field of rural theology in the UK. In the absence of a defined definition of rural theology, I engage with questions of rurality, theologies of place and contextual rural ministry and mission, developing a proposed definition that will inform the rest of my thesis while highlighting the lack of extant research about Presbyterian rural churches in Scotland.

2.5.1 What is ‘Rural’?

Concepts of rurality are widely debated, often reflecting presuppositions about a ‘rural idyll’ reinforced by fictional accounts or media portrayals.¹⁰⁸ The ways in

¹⁰⁶ Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Theology: Theologies of Mission*, trans. Karl E. Böhmer, English edition, vol. 2, *Missiological Engagements*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), p. 397.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Rural Theology Association’, *Rural Theology Association*, accessed 10 March 2021, <https://ruraltheologyassociation.com/>.

¹⁰⁸ Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England since 1800*, (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 1-12; Woods, *Rural*, pp. 16-49.

which rural areas are defined in popular culture generally correspond with population and location, but statistics and geographical features provide little insight into the nature of rural life and mentality. In 1988 the Rural Theology Association held a conference which agreed that rurality was best described in terms of values and relationships rather than discussions of locality, employment, socio-economic structure or population.¹⁰⁹ In 1991 the authors of *Church and Religion in Rural England* agreed that *perception* is of more significance than objective classification.¹¹⁰ Landscape, accessibility and scale or size of population remain important for the appearance of 'rurality' but cultural expectations of community life and social interactions or values affect the perception of certain places as 'rural'.¹¹¹ Within rural studies there are four traditional approaches to defining rurality: *descriptive*, *socio-cultural*, *locality* and *social representation*, but it is increasingly common in contemporary rural studies to approach rurality as a *social construction*.¹¹² This provides opportunities for researchers to consider the range of sociological, historical, cultural, geographical, demographic, structural, economic, environmental, political and philosophical features that 'shape people's experiences and perceptions of contemporary rurality.'¹¹³

There are limitations for each of these approaches. *Descriptive* definitions are merely descriptive of a limited range of statistical features and often rely on, or reinforce, preconceived ideas about rurality and perceived dichotomies between urban and rural areas.¹¹⁴ Little salience is attached to cultural mindset or the ways in which people live in their chosen location or participate in the local community. For example, the Scottish Government's 8-fold classification of rural places and people (see Table 1) appears to be based on Cloke and Edwards'

¹⁰⁹ Mervyn Wilson, 'Values of Rural Life and Christianity', in *The Rural Church Towards 2000* (Bulwick: Rural Theology Association, 1989), pp. 28–33.

¹¹⁰ Douglas Davies, Charles Watkins and Michael Winter, *Church and Religion in Rural England*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991),

¹¹¹ Michael Woods, *Rural Geography: Processes, Responses, and Experiences in Rural Restructuring*, (London; Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2005), p. 15; Woods, *Rural*, pp. 1-15.

¹¹² Keith Halfacree, 'Locality and Social Representation: Space, Discourses and Alternative Definitions of the Rural', *Journal of Rural Studies* 9, (1993), pp. 23–37; Woods, *Rural Geography*, pp. 5-15.

¹¹³ Woods, *Rural Geography*, p. 15.

¹¹⁴ Woods, *Rural Geography*, pp. 6-9.

indices of rurality for England and Wales,¹¹⁵ focusing on location, accessibility and amenities without reflecting the changing nature of communities in Scotland.¹¹⁶

Table 1: Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification, 8-fold¹¹⁷

Class	Class Name	Description
1	Large Urban Areas	Settlements of 125,000 people and over.
2	Other Urban Areas	Settlements of 10,000 to 124,999 people.
3	Accessible Small Towns	Settlements of 3,000 to 9,999 people, and within a 30-minute drive time of a Settlement of 10,000 or more.
4	Remote Small Towns	Settlements of 3,000 to 9,999 people, and with a drive time of over 30 minutes but less than or equal to 60 minutes to a Settlement of 10,000 or more.
5	Very Remote Small Towns	Settlements of 3,000 to 9,999 people, and with a drive time of over 60 minutes to a Settlement of 10,000 or more.
6	Accessible Rural Areas	Areas with a population of less than 3,000 people, and within a drive time of 30 minutes to a Settlement of 10,000 or more.
7	Remote Rural Areas	Areas with a population of less than 3,000 people, and with a drive time of over 30 minutes but less than or equal to 60 minutes to a Settlement of 10,000 or more.
8	Very Remote Rural Areas	Areas with a population of less than 3,000 people, and with a drive time of over 60 minutes to a Settlement of 10,000 or more.

Socio-cultural definitions of rurality approach the question of rurality by analysing societal features such as values or behaviours. The difficulty of basing the definition on a system of values and cultural expressions is that it often reinforces the perceived dichotomy between urban and rural and relies on

¹¹⁵ P. Cloke and G. Edwards, 'Rurality in England and Wales 1981: A Replication of the 1971 Index', *Regional Studies* 20 (1986), pp. 289–306.

¹¹⁶ St Andrew's House Scottish Government, 'Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification'.

¹¹⁷ St Andrew's House Scottish Government, 'Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification'.

subjective interpretations.¹¹⁸ In contrast, definitions of rurality based on *locality* are limited because structural features of production and consumption may be shared between rural and urban areas or communities.¹¹⁹ It is difficult to demonstrate that structural features of localities are intrinsically rural.

The most reasonable of the four traditional approaches is *social representation* because it reflects the way people identify themselves rather than imposing an arbitrary framework for interpreting rurality.¹²⁰ The difficulty of this is the extent to which individual people may have different interpretations of what it means to be rural.¹²¹ This feeds the plurality of conceptions of rural life, society and geography which can contribute to conflict and tensions, such as that between farmers and environmentalists¹²² or long-term local residents and incomers.¹²³

By approaching rurality as a *social construction*, it is possible to identify perceptions and representations of rurality. This forms the basis for exploring the ways in which rurality is ‘performed’ in social practices and ‘constituted’ by a combination of social and natural agencies as a ‘hybrid space’.¹²⁴ This has led to the development of a ‘three-fold model of rural space’ made up of locality, formal representations in legislation or policy and the everyday lives of those who live in rural areas.¹²⁵ However, as Woods observes, ‘the rural is an imagined space.’¹²⁶ It can be expressed in many different ways and, therefore, should be understood as a ‘multi-authored, multi-faceted and co-constituted space’ that is constantly changing.¹²⁷

¹¹⁸ Woods, *Rural Geography*, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ Woods, *Rural Geography*, p. 10.

¹²⁰ Woods, *Rural Geography*, pp. 10-13.

¹²¹ Woods, *Rural*, pp. 264-65.

¹²² Burchardt, *Rural Idyll*, pp. 168-77.

¹²³ Jędrej and Nuttall, *White Settlers*, pp. 83-115.

¹²⁴ Woods, *Rural Geography*, pp. 301-04.

¹²⁵ Woods, *Rural*, pp. 9-12.

¹²⁶ Woods, *Rural*, p. 264.

¹²⁷ Woods, *Rural*, p. 265.

Far from being a ‘rural idyll’, the constantly changing nature of rural spaces can be complicated and difficult for those who live in them. Changes to government policy or public service provision can disproportionally impact rural areas, reinforcing perceptions of discrimination and contributing to deprivation and social isolation.¹²⁸ Poor access to resources, public transport, employment and education can contribute to social exclusion and facilitate an ‘exodus of the young’ who leave the area to pursue educational, cultural or economic opportunities.¹²⁹ Likewise, patterns of migration towards rural areas, either in terms of ‘in-migration’ or ‘return migration’, impact cultural and social identity.¹³⁰ Historic rural depopulation in Scotland is interpreted by locals as eroding a sense of community identity and values by removing people who were part of the ‘traditional and virtuous rural way of life’; while recent trends of repopulation can be interpreted as bringing in ‘uninvited fugitives’ escaping their former lives or ‘expropriators, “white settlers” grabbing houses, land, and diverting government grants and assistance intended for the “local” population to themselves.’¹³¹ Migration to rural areas can be positive, contributing to revitalisation and renewal, but community empowerment projects and processes of enhancing resilience or sustainability through initiatives or policy inevitably contribute to debates about social and cultural change.¹³²

2.5.2 Rural People

Rural people are a key element of understanding rurality as a social construct. As Woods observes, ‘experiences of living in the rural vary enormously between individuals.’¹³³ In addition to individual experiences, there are complex interpersonal dynamics within local rural communities.¹³⁴ Rural people and

¹²⁸ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, pp. 198-208; Woods, *Rural*, pp. 179-81.

¹²⁹ Bruce Cameron, ‘Isolated Communities’, in *Changing Rural Life: A Christian Response to Key Rural Issues*, ed. Jeremy Martineau, Leslie J Francis, and Peter Francis, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004), pp. 44–62, at pp. 51-52.

¹³⁰ Woods, *Rural*, pp. 18

¹³¹ Jędrej and Nuttall, *White Settlers*, p. 48.

¹³² Jędrej and Nuttall, *White Settlers*, pp. 167-81; Artur Steiner, Mike Woolvin, and Sarah Skerratt, ‘Measuring Community Resilience: Developing and Applying a “Hybrid Evaluation” Approach’, *Community Development Journal* 53, no. 1, (January 2018), pp. 99–118.

¹³³ Woods, *Rural*, p. 162.

¹³⁴ Michael L. Langrish, ‘Dynamics of Community’, in *Changing Rural Life: A Christian Response to Key Rural Issues*, ed. Jeremy Martineau, Leslie J Francis, and Peter Francis, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004), pp. 21–43.

places can benefit from networks that build social capital, which can be classified according to three types: *bonding* through strong relational networks and friendships, *bridging* across social groups and *linking* with external organizations or communities.¹³⁵ Each form of social capital may be present to a greater or lesser extent within local communities, but social capital can be negatively impacted by changes that undermine community networks.¹³⁶ Concepts of belonging and social capital are impacted by health, rural deprivation and social isolation, which can be difficult to address in places with limited access to services and transport.¹³⁷

The 2020 Children's Neighbourhoods Report on rural poverty and social exclusion highlights the types of deprivation that impact young people in rural Scotland.¹³⁸ In doing so, it emphasises the complexity of measuring rural deprivation accurately because needs are often hidden or stigmatised in the 'rural idyll'. The report highlights a series of individual, community and external factors for addressing deprivation and social exclusion.¹³⁹ Factors such as spaces to meet, inter-generational networks, support or training in developing skills and experience, fostering identity and belonging, and encouraging participation in networking opportunities and/or activities could be applied across demographic groups and addressed theologically and practically by rural churches.¹⁴⁰

In *God's Belongers* (2017), David Walker identifies four ways in which people 'belong': through personal relationships, places, one-off events and regular activities.¹⁴¹ In his 2006 article on 'Belonging to Rural Church and Society', Walker classifies people who 'belong' in rural communities according to the

¹³⁵ James Bell, Jill Hopkinson, and Trevor Willmott, 'Reading the Context', in *Reshaping Rural Ministry: A Theological and Practical Handbook*, ed. James Bell, Jill Hopkinson, and Trevor Willmott, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009), pp. 1–30, at p. 12.

¹³⁶ Langrish, 'Dynamics of Community', pp. 24–29.

¹³⁷ Ryan McGuire, Alberto Longo, and Erin Sherry, 'Tackling Poverty and Social Isolation Using a Smart Rural Development Initiative', *Journal of Rural Studies* 89, (2022), pp. 161–70.

¹³⁸ J. Glass, C. Bynner, and C. Chapman, 'Children and Young People and Rural Poverty and Social Exclusion: A Review of Evidence', (Glasgow: Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland, 2020).

¹³⁹ Glass, Bynner and Chapman, 'Children and Young People', pp. 28–32.

¹⁴⁰ Arthur Rank Centre, 'Rural Isolation and Loneliness: A Toolkit for Rural Churches', (Arthur Rank Centre, 2014).

¹⁴¹ Walker, *God's Belongers*, pp. 18–62.

following twelve types: ‘Commuters’, ‘Privacy Seekers’, ‘Trophy Owners’, ‘Established Residents’, ‘Travellers and Gypsies’, ‘Lifestyle Shifters’, ‘Absent Friends’, ‘Full-time Dwellers’, ‘The Missing Vulnerable’, ‘Arriving Vulnerable’, ‘Tourists and Visitors’, and, finally, ‘The British Public’.¹⁴² While these are characterisations of types, they illustrate the diversity among people who identify themselves with rural areas. Individuals may identify themselves, or others, as a combination of types. Walker’s list highlights the key components of each, illustrating the potential for social and ideological conflict within rural communities. In Scotland, the potential for conflict within rural communities is further exacerbated by an influx of ‘white settlers’, a term used to describe predominantly English ‘incomers’.¹⁴³

2.5.3 Place

The most readily identifiable feature of rurality is location. For Graham Usher, landscapes are places to encounter God.¹⁴⁴ He encourages people to spend time getting to know the land by walking it, breathing it and experiencing it, leaving space to ‘experience the gift of the divine in the ordinary.’¹⁴⁵ As he traces his journey through land, forest, river, mountain, desert, garden, sea and sky he offers perspective on the ways in which people can encounter God.

Ivor MacDonald’s *Land of the Living* (2005) begins by presenting a biblical theology of land before addressing the challenges facing rural communities through the lens of Christian reflection.¹⁴⁶ He argues there is a theological imperative to care for both land and people because ‘a renewed countryside is part of the eternal purpose of God.’¹⁴⁷ He summarises the ‘Christian summons to care’ in four words: ‘*witness, respect, relationship and hope.*’¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² David Walker, ‘Belonging to Rural Church and Society: Theology and Sociological Perspectives’, *Rural Theology* 4, no. 2, (2006), pp. 85–97, at pp. 86–89.

¹⁴³ Jędrej and Nuttall, *White Settlers*, pp. 3–4.

¹⁴⁴ Graham B. Usher, *Places of Enchantment: Meeting God in Landscapes*, (London: SPCK, 2012), pp. xi–xvi.

¹⁴⁵ Usher, *Places of Enchantment*, p. 50.

¹⁴⁶ Ivor MacDonald, *Land of the Living: Christian Reflections on the Countryside*, (College Station: Virtualbookworm.com, 2005).

¹⁴⁷ MacDonald, *Land of the Living*, p. 33.

¹⁴⁸ MacDonald, *Land of the Living*, p. 40. Emphasis original.

The title of Andrew Bowden's *Ministry in the Countryside* (1994) focuses the lens on the people, churches and features of life and work 'in the countryside'.¹⁴⁹ In doing so, Bowden emphasises the significance of 'place' for the ways in which ministry and mission operate in rural areas. For Bowden, the future of mission and ministry in rural areas must be based in and committed to the local place and people.¹⁵⁰ Therefore, a theological understanding of place should be a priority.

Rurality is accepted to be a social construct. The same can be said of 'place'. For Philip Sheldrake 'place is a cultural category' where physical spaces interact with 'our social constructions of reality.'¹⁵¹ In articulating his understanding of a socially constructed 'sense of place' he discusses relationships, history, embodied belonging, committed participation, landscapes, memories, narrative, conflict and particularity. In tracing the significance of place in Christian tradition he highlights interpretations of 'people as the place of the sacred' and 'the church building as a physical container for the living Body of Christ.'¹⁵² In advocating for a Christian theology of place, Sheldrake appeals for theologians to acknowledge the broken aspects of material existence and the particularities of place alongside the sacred mystery of God's presence.¹⁵³

In *A Christian Theology of Place* (2003), John Inge argues that a renewed appreciation of place is a gift that expresses the intrinsic link between people and places as a result of encounters.¹⁵⁴ Places of sacramental encounter with the divine become holy for individuals and communities.¹⁵⁵ Inge draws on the legacy of Christian pilgrimage to interpret such places of encounter with a three-fold approach: as places of rooting in the past, witnessing in the present and looking towards the future.¹⁵⁶ For Inge, a robust theology of place offers an

¹⁴⁹ Andrew Bowden, *Ministry in the Countryside: A Model for the Future*, (London: Mowbray, 1994).

¹⁵⁰ Bowden, *Ministry in the Countryside*, pp. 47-52.

¹⁵¹ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 4.

¹⁵² Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, pp. 37, 51.

¹⁵³ Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, pp. 63.

¹⁵⁴ John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 123-43.

¹⁵⁵ Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, pp. 89-90.

¹⁵⁶ Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, p. 122.

opportunity for the Church to engage in a contextually appropriate ‘witness to the fact that roots, place and destination are all important to human existence’ in their particular place and community.¹⁵⁷

2.5.4 Parish

The Church of Scotland is geographical or territorial, dividing Scotland into parishes in a continuation of the historical medieval practice of ensuring that every place, community and individual has a local church to which they can ‘belong’. Alongside conversations about ‘mixed economy’ Christian mission or reforming local church ministry by radically reorganising parish churches and encouraging Fresh Expressions, pioneer ministries or alternate models of church, there are also celebrations of ‘traditional’ parish ministry. Although many distinctive contributions in defence of traditional parishes are based in the Church of England, they offer important insight into the challenges and opportunities facing the Church of Scotland as a parish church.

Andrew Rumsey’s *Parish: An Anglican Theology of Place* (2017) provides one such discussion, arguing that the parish ‘is the primary embodiment of Anglican social space’ because it brings together sociology, theology, ideology and geography.¹⁵⁸ For Rumsey, parishes bring together multiple threads of belonging and intersection, bridging the national, local and natural dimensions of human existence within a society that is both sacred and secular.¹⁵⁹ In *Lost Church* (2013) Alan Billings argues that local parish churches should provide a place for people who ‘belong’, who ‘believe’ and who ‘attend’, recognising that there may be significant overlap between the categories.¹⁶⁰ For Billings, the calling of the Church of England to care for everyone within the geographical boundaries of the parish requires local churches to ‘make it possible for people to find God in their lives in the contemporary age’ by becoming incarnational, prioritising presence in the local context and serving local people with modesty and humility.¹⁶¹ Bob Mayo, Cameron Collington and David Gillet’s *A Parish Handbook*

¹⁵⁷ Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, pp. 136-37.

¹⁵⁸ Andrew Rumsey, *Parish: An Anglican Theology of Place*, (London: SCM Press, 2017), p. 180.

¹⁵⁹ Rumsey, *Parish*, p. 181.

¹⁶⁰ Alan Billings, *Lost Church: Why We Must Find It Again*, (London: SPCK, 2013), pp. xiv-xv.

¹⁶¹ Billings, *Lost Church*, pp. 124-28.

(2016) is a literal A-Z celebration of parish life and a call for the ‘parish church to rediscover its radical authentic missionary self.’¹⁶² They observe that the primary question for a parish church is how to ‘love, cherish and nurture the liturgical, sacramental and congregational treasures she has been given’ in the church’s local context.¹⁶³

Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank go further in their praise of the parish by emphasising the long-term commitment of the parish church to the local context, changing and adapting as necessary but maintaining a consistent witness for generations.¹⁶⁴ They critique Fresh Expressions for encouraging segregation between people in parish communities based on their interests or personal preferences.¹⁶⁵ Rather than advocating for a ‘mixed economy’ approach to mission, Davison and Milbank encourage a ‘mixed community’ within the parish church as a:

local witness to the Church as mixed, universal and all embracing. It is a politically charged act of resistance to the forces of the age.¹⁶⁶

They offer an appeal for a recovery of a positive sense of parish churches as agents for change within the local community. In doing so, they echo John Inge’s conclusions and argue that place, as represented in parish churches, serves the needs of contemporary culture and society by ‘nurturing a sense of belonging [and] configuring a vision of humanity that embraces the local and the universal together, the whole cosmos human and non-human, the transcendent as well as the immanent.’¹⁶⁷

In his 2004 Chalmers Lectures, Peter Neilson observed that the concept of ‘parish’ ministry in Scotland can act as a ‘starting place for authentic mission.’¹⁶⁸

¹⁶² Bob Mayo, Cameron Collington, and David Gillett, *The Parish Handbook*, (London: SCM Press, 2016), p. xiv.

¹⁶³ Mayo, Collington and Gillett, *The Parish Handbook*, p. 81.

¹⁶⁴ Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶⁵ Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, pp. 64-92.

¹⁶⁶ Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, p. 92.

¹⁶⁷ Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, p. 169.

¹⁶⁸ Peter Neilson, *Church on the Move: New Church, New Generation, New Scotland: An Emerging Profile*, (Glasgow: Covenanters, 2005), p. 48.

This is because the stated calling of the church is to be responsible for the people of a particular area, the people who ‘belong’ to the parish. However, he observes that an obsession with ‘territory’ may hinder mission by undermining the potential of a church to witness to members of the community by collaborating with others for the mission of God.¹⁶⁹ By this he means an attitude of conquest rather than kingdom-building, where ministers or church leaders and churches are focused on whether people attend *their* church rather than whether people have an encounter with God. This hinders the possibility of working together across parish or denominational boundaries. Neilson argues that the changing nature of Scottish Presbyterianism cannot be accommodated by this type of isolationism. As Neilson notes, the trajectory in Scotland is towards ‘parish groupings’ or linkages where two or more individual parish churches are under the oversight of a single minister. In his opinion, this offers churches an opportunity to review their understanding of mission and equip teams to work together in witnessing to their neighbours or relational networks.¹⁷⁰

2.5.5 Practical Mission and Ministry

Arguably the most influential UK publication on rural church ministry is Andrew Bowden’s *Ministry in the Countryside*.¹⁷¹ Bowden set out to produce a model for the future of rural ministry with the goal of inspiring rural clergy and laity to embrace the possibilities for their local area. Bowden begins with the idea of a ‘parson-shaped hole’ in rural parishes, highlighting the aspects of ministry associated with stipendiary clergy: pastoral care, community involvement, representing the church, leading services, teaching and acting as ‘father and shepherd’ for the parish.¹⁷² He argues that a clergy-dependent model of ministry is unsustainable because the context has changed. Instead, his primary thesis and vision is about empowering the laity and encouraging the development of

¹⁶⁹ Neilson, *Church on the Move*, p. 49.

¹⁷⁰ Neilson, *Church on the Move*, pp. 92-93.

¹⁷¹ Bowden, *Ministry in the Countryside*, p. 3.

¹⁷² Bowden, *Ministry in the Countryside*, pp. 47-48.

collaborative ‘local ministry groups’ that are focused on evangelism through ‘being’ and ‘doing’ alongside their neighbours.¹⁷³

This is the focus of *A Discipling Presence*, a resource for rural ministry and mission in rural areas that was jointly produced in 2017 by the United Reformed Church (URC) and the Methodist Church in the UK, expanding on the 2004 Methodist Church report ‘Effective Christian Presence’.¹⁷⁴ The resource is a workbook for ‘anyone who has an interest in seeing the kingdom of God become more tangible in rural settings.’¹⁷⁵ As such, it addresses various embodied representations of ‘church’ in rural areas, recognising the diversity of contexts and ministries currently active across the UK. It prioritises discipleship, lay involvement and connecting with local people in multi-generational, transformational, missional Christian communities. It is explicitly ecumenical, acknowledging that ‘those outside the Church see little or no significance in our denominationalism’ and encouraging cooperation between denominations and models of Christian communities.¹⁷⁶ The final chapter, ‘What if...’, challenges rural congregations to think creatively about the opportunities of their local context by asking ‘what if...’ questions.¹⁷⁷

The workbook is one of many creative responses to the contextual opportunities of engaging in mission and ministry in rural areas. Others include Rona Orme’s *Rural Children, Rural Church* (2007), the *Reshaping Rural Ministry* handbook, edited by James Bell, Jill Hopkinson and Trevor Willmott (2009), and *Resourcing Rural Ministry*, published by the Arthur Rank Centre in 2015.¹⁷⁸ *Resourcing Rural Ministry* offers a collection of practical insights for mission in rural areas,

¹⁷³ Bowden, *Ministry in the Countryside*, pp. 47-52.

¹⁷⁴ Methodist Church of Great Britain et al., *A Discipling Presence: A Workbook to Help Promote and Sustain an Effective Christian Presence in Rural Communities*, (London: Methodist Publishing, 2017).

¹⁷⁵ Methodist Church of Great Britain et al., *A Discipling Presence*, p. 13.

¹⁷⁶ Methodist Church of Great Britain et al., *A Discipling Presence*, p. 25.

¹⁷⁷ Methodist Church of Great Britain et al., *A Discipling Presence*, pp. 51-55.

¹⁷⁸ Rona Orme, *Rural Children, Rural Church: Mission Opportunities in the Countryside*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2007); James Bell, Jill Hopkinson and Trevor Willmott, eds., *Reshaping Rural Ministry: A Theological and Practical Handbook*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009); Simon Martin et al., *Resourcing Rural Ministry: Practical Insights for Mission*, ed. Jill Hopkinson, (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2015).

predominantly focusing on the ministry of lay people.¹⁷⁹ Covering topics such as multi-church ministry, worship, buildings, Messy Church¹⁸⁰ and Fresh Expressions, it represents the work of the Arthur Rank Centre in supporting rural ministry in practical ways.

The 2015 Church of England report ‘Released for Mission, Growing the Rural Church’ records the results of research by the Rural Affairs Group of General Synod that focuses on the realities of rural ministries in multi-church groups and makes a series of recommendations for the future.¹⁸¹ The five priorities highlighted in the report are:

1. Building a culture of discipleship appropriate to the context.
2. Envisioning, enabling and equipping the ministry of lay people.
3. Effective training, support and resourcing for clergy and lay people in rural multi-church groups.
4. The simplification of governance and legal structures, the requirements for officers and the need for administrative resourcing.
5. Facilitation of creative ecumenical partnerships.¹⁸²

Each of the recommendations is rooted in the evidence of the research and focused on enabling churches to thrive in their local context, bringing together the combination of place, people and parish in pursuing a way forward for rural mission and ministry.

2.5.6 Presbyterian Rural Churches

In reviewing rural theology and the resources for rural churches there is a notable absence of Scottish voices in the wider conversation – a gap which this thesis seeks to address. There are limited resources which address the experience of rural churches in Scotland and fewer which specifically reflect Presbyterian experiences. Rev H. M. B. Reid’s discourses on *A Country Parish*

¹⁷⁹ Martin et al., *Resourcing Rural Ministry*, p. 11.

¹⁸⁰ Messy Church is a ‘way of being church for families’ that involves creativity, teaching, food and fellowship time. Messy Church, ‘What Is Messy Church?’, accessed 22 May 2020, <https://messychurch.org.uk/what-messy-church>

¹⁸¹ Rural Affairs Group, ‘Released for Mission, Growing the Rural Church’, (Church of England, 2015).

¹⁸² Rural Affairs Group, ‘Released for Mission’, p. 3.

were first delivered in 1899 before being printed in 1908, but they evince a mix of history and homiletic idealisation of the rural that is both familiar and disquieting.¹⁸³ Alongside accounts of parish schools where Reid affirms Christian education and the church's responsibility for the school,¹⁸⁴ Reid makes impassioned appeals for parish unity, equality, volunteering and accessible spaces in church buildings to facilitate social engagement.¹⁸⁵ His observations about the history and responsibilities of parishioners, as the new heritors,¹⁸⁶ serve as a reminder that questions about maintaining buildings and properties are not new. Likewise, his insights about the possibilities of closing buildings and combining parishes resonate with current discussions in the Church of Scotland, while reflecting Reid's turn-of-the century context and convictions.

One of the few more recent accounts of rural churches in Scotland appears in *Ten Rural Churches* (1988), a collection of stories of rural churches from across the UK.¹⁸⁷ John Lyall's contribution on 'Alvie and Insh Parish Church, Inverness-shire' begins by describing familiar elements such as sparse populations, multiple buildings, ageing congregations with few children or young people, separation between church life and daily life and a listlessness in worship.¹⁸⁸ In 1978 the kirk session gathered to assess the situation and discern the direction of change and appropriate actions. As a result, they chose to invest in two areas: 1) building up the faith of the body of Christ through regular bible study, a small library of Christian books, training and involvement in leading worship, and 2) engaging missionally with the people of the parish, prioritising hospitality,

¹⁸³ H. M. B. Reid, *A Country Parish*, (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1908), p. i.

¹⁸⁴ Reid alludes to the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act saying, 'Presbytery has bidden goodbye to the School, which it formerly fathered and directed' and bemoaning the possibility that 'Secular Instruction alone will be permitted', but still affirms the importance of the Church's involvement in the Parish School. Reid, *A Country Parish*, pp. 46-93.

¹⁸⁵ Reid, *A Country Parish*, pp. 33-43.

¹⁸⁶ Heritors were landowners responsible for maintaining the buildings and grounds of the church and manse, as well as contribute to the finances and charitable work of the church. As Joseph Laing Waugh records, 'He's a heritor, of course, an', as ye ken, bound by the law to dae his bit to keep kirk an' manse ticht and dry.' Joseph Laing Waugh, *Heroes in Homespun*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1921), p. 19.

¹⁸⁷ John Richardson ed., *Ten Rural Churches* (Sussex: MARC, 1988). It is notable that the map of contributing churches in the front of the book places Alvie and Insh near Glenfinnan rather than Aviemore and Kinraig, indicating misrepresentation of Scottish churches and poor understanding of Scottish geography.

¹⁸⁸ John Lyall, 'Alvie and Insh Parish Church, Inverness-Shire', in *Ten Rural Churches*, ed. John Richardson (Sussex: MARC, 1988), pp. 45-58.

communication and relationship. A quarterly church magazine, along with personal invitations and letters, facilitated awareness of church and community events. John Lyall's final word on developments in his parish focuses on the place of prayer as the 'power behind the parish', with monthly ecumenical prayer meetings, a weekly women's prayer circle and prayer cards for a range of people and events. He notes that eight years transformed the Kirk Session's focus from the future of *their* church to seeking God's direction for *His* church, unifying the 'rich mixture of evangelical, charismatic and traditional beliefs' represented in the churches in a common desire.¹⁸⁹ It is difficult to evaluate the accuracy of Lyall's report on Alvie and Insh Church, or to draw conclusions about the longevity of the initiatives he records and their impact on the parishes without further investigation. However, in a sparse field, it remains a useful illustration of change in a rural Scottish parish church.

The 2018 'Hope in the Rural Church' report by the Scottish Churches Rural Group (SCRG) for Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) offers a rural-focused ecumenical response to the Scottish Church Census of 2016 and Peter Brierley's *Growth Amidst Decline*.¹⁹⁰ One chapter of the Brierley report records geographical patterns of attendance, noting that rural churches are small and often comprised of faithful attenders who have a 'strong tenacity to "hang on"', but does not apply a geographical or rural/urban lens to the rest of his results.¹⁹¹ The SCRG report attempted to analyse the census results from a rural perspective, in combination with insights from Steve Aisthorpe's *The Invisible Church* which investigates the experience of 'churchless' Christians in the north of Scotland and looks at the differences between rural and urban areas.¹⁹²

The report begins by highlighting the results of the census that pertain to rural churches, considering questions about ordained church leadership and church size. It suggests that traditional models of ministry need to change in response

¹⁸⁹ Lyall, 'Alvie and Insh', 58.

¹⁹⁰ ACTS SCRG, 'Hope in the Rural Church', (Stirling: ACTS Scottish Churches Rural Group, May 2018), pp. 4-5.

¹⁹¹ Brierley, *Growth Amidst Decline*, p. 118.

¹⁹² Aisthorpe's work offers important insights into the complexities in the wider context of rural (and urban) communities, but does not specifically address the situation *within* churches. Aisthorpe, *The Invisible Church*, pp. 16-17.

to declining numbers of congregants and clergy.¹⁹³ Questions about the impact of Brexit¹⁹⁴ and the changing age profile of churches and rural areas prompted reflections on working together ecumenically to support communities and being more intentional about using digital technologies.¹⁹⁵ The report also explores creative innovations beyond traditional church models, encouraging people in rural areas to participate actively in the rich diversity of possibilities for Christian expression such as Messy Church, Fresh Expressions and the Filling Station.¹⁹⁶ The report concludes with a section on church activity in the community, emphasising the importance of community and environmental action or pilgrimage in the future of rural church ministry in Scotland.¹⁹⁷ This section includes an overview and collection of short case study examples of church activity in the community.

In the absence of further options for explicitly rural-focused perspectives on the Church of Scotland, it is necessary to consider the broader context. Doug Gay's influential book *Reforming the Kirk*, based on his 2017 Chalmers Lectures, presents a summary of developments affecting the Church of Scotland, tracing societal and cultural shifts in Scotland which have accelerated decline and discouragement.¹⁹⁸ He argues for wholesale practical reforms in finance,¹⁹⁹ ministry and mission²⁰⁰ (specifically focusing on the role and training of ministers) and organisational structure.²⁰¹ He concludes by acknowledging the limitations of pursuing purely structural reforms to address the overall decline within the Church of Scotland, proposing that contextually missiological and

¹⁹³ SCRG, 'Hope in the Rural Church', pp. 9-12.

¹⁹⁴ Brexit is the short name for the British exit from the European Union. At the time of the SCRG report there was widespread anxiety and uncertainty about the possible impact of Brexit for industry, commerce and agriculture.

¹⁹⁵ SCRG, 'Hope in the Rural Church', pp. 13-19.

¹⁹⁶ SCRG, 'Hope in the Rural Church', pp. 22-30. The Filling Station is 'an informal way of expressing the Christian faith' through monthly or semi-regular non-denominational celebrations of worship, teaching, testimonies and prayer. 'The Filling Station', accessed 9 February 2021, <https://thefillingstation.org.uk/>.

¹⁹⁷ SCRG, 'Hope in the Rural Church', pp. 34-46.

¹⁹⁸ Gay, *Reforming the Kirk*, pp. 11-29.

¹⁹⁹ Gay, *Reforming the Kirk*, pp. 71-97.

²⁰⁰ Gay, *Reforming the Kirk*, pp. 98-142.

²⁰¹ Gay, *Reforming the Kirk*, pp. 143-71.

reflective enquiries into the future of local churches are ‘part of learning to be the church of Jesus Christ.’²⁰²

2.6 Summary: Bringing My Voice to the Conversation

Having reviewed the existing literature relating to contextual practical theology, congregational studies, church growth and renewal, missiology and rural ministry, I have demonstrated the importance of examining the lived reality of local churches. By highlighting the key elements of rural theology – people, place, parish and practice – I have developed a theologically informed approach to my research. In developing a definition of rural theology, I have adapted the definition of practical theology given by John Swinton and Harriet Mowat:

critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world with a view to ensuring faithful participation in the continuing mission of the triune God.²⁰³

The idea of a distinctively ‘rural’ theology is largely influenced by contextual theology, grounded in the lived experience of people, reflecting the priority of local, personal and practical factors. As such, a definition of ‘rural’ theology must be broad enough to incorporate theoretical discussions and practical application. Rural theology is contextual, in so much as it focuses on or originates in rural settings. It is also practical, offering perspectives on the present situation as a means of influencing practice. It is missional, reflecting the importance of integration between church and community in rural areas. It is pastoral, concerned with the lived experience of people in rural places. It has the potential to be prophetic, facilitating faithful and discerning responses to the present in planning for the future.

Therefore, as a working definition:²⁰⁴

Rural Theology is a mode of practical theology with particular geographically related missional and contextual concerns. It encompasses both critical theological reflection on the practices of the Church in rural

²⁰² Gay, *Reforming the Kirk*, p. 175.

²⁰³ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, (London: SCM Press, 2006), p. 25.

²⁰⁴ I am indebted to Doug Gay for his support and assistance in developing and refining this definition.

contexts and theological reflection on any and all aspects of those contexts with a view to influencing practice and supporting Christian mission and ministry in rural areas.

Its potential scope is therefore very broad and may be variously focused in relation to particular pastoral, ecclesial, social, economic, political, cultural or ecological interests.

While there is a wealth of literature addressing the contextual realities of the Church of England, there is scant evidence of a Scottish Presbyterian perspective in the existing literature and resources for local rural mission and ministry. There is a demonstrable desire among rural practitioners for research addressing and analysing the present and future of Presbyterian rural parish churches. The changing nature of rural life and societal norms or expectations in the UK merit ongoing contextualised investigations at local levels.

In bringing together strands of contextual, practical and missional theology, my thesis provides a necessary perspective on the future of rural parish churches in Scotland. My research will serve the development of a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing mission and ministry in rural areas in Scotland by engaging in the day-to-day reality of these case study churches. My contribution to the conversation around rural theology is at once *particular*, focused on the local context, and *general*, with application points for the Church of Scotland and beyond. By commissioning my research, Crossbrae Presbytery are contributing to a field of study which has been neglected. Braedubh and Riverglebe are, therefore, a representative means of continuing the development of rural theology with a distinctively Scottish Presbyterian parish focus. In the following chapters I will draw on my experiences of people, places, parishes and practices as I examine possibilities for the future of rural mission and ministry in rural Scottish parish churches.

Chapter 3 Gathering the Tools: Methods for Moving from Church Member to Church Researcher

A toolbox is a wonderful thing, provided it has the right tools for the job. When I first moved into the unfurnished manse I was confronted by a variety of odd jobs and small challenges, ably handled by the property convenor. On [their] first visit [they] brought a replacement power outlet, a screwdriver, a pair of pliers and a handful of screws. During that visit [they] discovered another couple of things that needed work, but [they] did not have the right tools. I was unable to help as I had no tools whatsoever. The following day [they] brought [their] full toolbox and set to work.

Later I bought a basic toolkit, so I would be equipped for odd jobs around the house, which proved to be very useful. Unfortunately, I discovered my toolkit did not have an appropriate spanner for removing the travel bolts when a new washing machine was delivered. I went to my neighbour to ask for the right spanner, knowing he had a good collection of tools in his garage. He asked which size I needed and went into the garage and picked it off the wall. He had every tool a person could possibly need or want, organised and clearly labelled so it could be easily picked up. When I commented on it he gave me a wry grin and remarked, 'I can't resist collecting tools. My wife complains about it, but it's worth having the right tool for the job when I need it.'

Having established the paucity of available research about rural parish churches in Scotland, I now turn to identifying the methodological research tools that influenced the iterative development of my fieldwork. Crossbrae Presbytery and the University of Glasgow were clear that my research was to be qualitative immersive fieldwork with two specific parish churches and a basic framework of three phases of research: a) orientation with initial data collection; b) active involvement with developing or implementing initiatives; and c) writing-up and reporting to the presbytery and churches. Within this framework I explored different methods as I adapted to the local context and discovered the benefits and limitations of immersive autoethnographic participation in church life.

This chapter represents the culmination of my methodological journey, recording key elements of my autoethnographic approach to fieldwork in rural

churches as I incorporated prayerful theological reflection and intuitive relational responses to my experiences. I prioritise the importance of qualitative ‘thick’ description and analysis of my lived experience in both churches and their associated contexts. I present an overview of my research phases as I piece together the ‘jigsaw’ of socio-historical and geographical context, learn to join in the ‘choir’ as a participant in church and community life, transition from ‘incomer’ to ‘compere’ as an active contributor and ‘retell the story’ as I report to the churches. My toolbox of methods reflects the tools I used in response to the challenges and opportunities offered by the context of researching these rural churches.

3.1 Approaching the Question

The nature of the project meant that I arrived in Braedubh and began interacting with local people before I had oriented myself well in the literature around methodology and methods. Crossbrae Presbytery were eager for me to begin working alongside Braedubh and Riverglebe but offered little guidance on specific questions or approaches to carrying out the research beyond asking me to investigate the challenges and opportunities for rural mission, ministry, discipleship and church revitalisation. As a result, the early months of my research were characterised by a plethora of questions emerging from my reading and my immersion in the everyday life and worship of Braedubh and, to a lesser degree, Riverglebe.

I began my fieldwork with the intention of using a variety of tools to gather written and oral data from participants. I constructed a research ethics application rooted in social scientific qualitative analysis using a series of formal interviews, questionnaires and focus groups alongside developing new initiatives and engaging in Participatory Action Research (PAR)²⁰⁵ or Theological Action Research (TAR);²⁰⁶ but, I quickly discovered I did not have the appropriate training, resources or experience to implement my proposed approach within the

²⁰⁵ PAR emerged in the mid-twentieth century as a means of providing opportunities for the marginalized and oppressed to express their concerns and perspectives. Mary Brydon-Miller et al., ‘Jazz and the Banyan Tree: Roots and Riffs on Participatory Action Research’, in *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Fourth Edition, (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), pp. 347–75.

²⁰⁶ Cameron et al., *Talking about God*, pp. 63–69.

agreed timeline. As I interacted with the wealth of available material on qualitative methodology, I was overwhelmed by the variety of different social scientific approaches to fieldwork and struggled to find a balance between the academic discourse on methods and the messy reality of fieldwork. Additionally, my presence in the local area was already impacting the local context as I was entering into conversations and responding informally to questions about my role. In the tension between procedures or methods and my instinctive ethnographic response to the context and participants, I recognised the importance of owning my perspective and experience as a valid contribution to the field of research in rural churches.²⁰⁷

My final research question, ‘Is there a sustainable future for mission and ministry in rural Scottish parish churches?’ reflects the breadth of my research experience and the underlying question articulated by my participants about the future of their churches. It is interpretive, relying on my ability to ‘understand and respond to the challenges facing churches in rural contexts’ based on my fieldwork. As I assembled my *toolbox* of methods I was inspired by ethnography and action research. By immersing myself in the day-to-day ebb and flow of life in Braedubh and Riverglebe and recording my interactions, observations and reflections, I engaged in social constructivist and pragmatic research, shaped in dialogue with the people of Braedubh and Riverglebe. Adopting a multi-method approach to carrying out the research and writing my thesis enabled me to reflect the diversity of types of knowledge represented in my research and writing.

3.2 A Multi-Method Approach

Qualitative research is necessarily complex and multifaceted, described by Joy Higgs and Nita Cherry as ‘a way of looking at the world and a constellation of approaches used to generate knowledge about the human world.’²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ This was largely influenced by reading and reflecting on the interaction between procedural and constructed knowledge in *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. Mary Field Belenky et al., *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, 10th anniversary ed, (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), pp. 87-152.

²⁰⁸ Joy Higgs and Nita Cherry, ‘Doing Qualitative Research on Practice’, in *Writing Qualitative Research on Practice*, ed. Joy Higgs, Debbie Horsfall, and Sandra Grace, (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), pp. 3–12, at p. 3.

Methodologically, I achieved this through crafting a multi-method approach, encouraged by Swinton and Mowat's recommendation to take 'the best of what is available within the accepted models of qualitative research[...] not necessarily bound by any one model.'²⁰⁹

My research was *participatory*, intentionally engaging in researching *with* others. As I lived alongside people, I engaged in conversation with them, finding opportunities to ask for their perspectives and opinions and inviting their contributions.²¹⁰ Their participation influenced my questions and interpretations, ultimately shaping the direction of my research.

My research was also *constructivist* or *constructed*, intrinsically linked to my presence in the local context. A *constructivist* approach recognises that 'the knower is an intimate part of the known.'²¹¹ I was an active participant who was co-creating the reality I was experiencing and recording.²¹²

In recognition of the limitations of *constructed* knowledge, my research was necessarily *reflexive*, requiring me to examine my assumptions and maintain conscious awareness of my perspectives and processes. My embodied presence in Braedubh and Riverglebe was my primary research tool and, as such, I accepted the impossibility of objectivity, engaging with questions about my perspective and frame of reference as I recorded my experiences.²¹³

My writing, both in my notes and in the final form of my thesis was *hermeneutic* or *interpretive*. Throughout my fieldwork and writing I was engaging in a practice of interpretation where I looked for meaning and explored the framework of basic beliefs that guided my actions and reflections.²¹⁴

²⁰⁹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 50.

²¹⁰ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 228.

²¹¹ Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing*, p. 137.

²¹² Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 61.

²¹³ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. 59-66.

²¹⁴ Stephen Loftus and Franziska Trede, 'Hermeneutic Writing', in *Writing Qualitative Research on Practice*, ed. Joy Higgs, Debbie Horsfall, and Sandra Grace, (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), pp. 61-72.

My hermeneutic framework was founded on my Christian *theistic* approach to researching mission and ministry. As a practising Christian, I acknowledged the transcendent reality of God's revelation and action in the world and looked for indications of God's work in the churches and communities of Braedubh and Riverglebe. Using *correlational theological reflection*, I integrated my experiential, situational and contextual data with prayerful reflection on scripture and tradition.²¹⁵

Throughout my fieldwork I engaged in *practical action*. I intentionally looked for opportunities to apply and examine theological issues in everyday situations. As I participated in the everyday life of Braedubh and Riverglebe, I also contributed to initiatives based on my assessment of the situation, thereby enabling or facilitating opportunities for change within churches and communities.²¹⁶

Within the apparent freedom of qualitative research as 'an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter'²¹⁷ it is important to retain an overarching structure for research and analysis. My research was based on autoethnography and action research within practical theology. This approach brought each component into dialogue with the others, creating a safe space to engage with the lived reality of those in rural churches in the Scottish Borders. It also provided a framework for talking about my research and involvement that acknowledged the challenge of bringing myself into the local context.

3.3 Action Research

The origins of Participant Action Research (PAR) are rooted in the Global South, apart from North American or Western European influences.²¹⁸ These movements are post-colonial in ideology, emphasizing freedom from external or hierarchical dominance by 'outsiders', and therefore opposed to traditional concepts of academic research whereby the 'expert researcher' imposes her

²¹⁵ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. 77-98; Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, pp. 81-95.

²¹⁶ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. 254-60.

²¹⁷ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 'Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research', in *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Fourth Edition, (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), pp. 1-41, at p. 3.

²¹⁸ Brydon-Miller et al., 'Jazz and the Banyan Tree', pp. 347-375.

hypotheses without consideration for local people.²¹⁹ An emphasis on social justice and participation as a means of transformative action remains foundational to many expressions of PAR, although it has also become an accepted social science research method.²²⁰ By inviting participation, the research can both reflect and influence the contextual situation as it emerges from the interaction *with* participants. Critical subjectivity such as that expounded by Heron and Reason claims a participatory worldview wherein the ‘knower participates in the known, articulates a world, in at least four interdependent ways: experiential, presentational, propositional and practical.’²²¹

Theological Action Research (TAR) is defined as ‘a partnership between an insider and an outsider team to undertake research and conversations answering theological questions about faithful practice in order to renew both theology and practice in the service of God’s mission.’²²² It involves a theological action-reflection cycle and uses ‘theology in four voices’ as a tool for interpreting the complexity of Christian practice as ‘faith seeking understanding.’²²³ Normative theology is the core of theological identity for a group, usually associated with official church teaching, scripture and traditions, and functioning as the moderating standard of belief for members of the group.²²⁴ Espoused theology is articulated by members of the group when discussing their beliefs, enabling researchers to assess the ways in which group members understand theology.²²⁵ Operant theology is embedded in the practices and behaviours of group members as they express their underlying values through their actions.²²⁶ Formal theology is that associated with academic or educated theologians and is considered to be

²¹⁹ Kindon, Pain, and Kesby, ‘Participatory Action Research’, p. 10.

²²⁰ For a selection of recent examples of PAR in action, see Sara Kindon, Rachel Pain, and Mike Kesby, eds., *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place*, Routledge Studies in Human Geography 22, (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

²²¹ John Heron and Peter Reason, ‘A Participatory Inquiry Paradigm’, *Qualitative Inquiry* 3, no. 3, (September 1997), pp. 274–94, at p. 279.

²²² Cameron et al., *Talking about God*, p. 63.

²²³ Cameron et al., *Talking about God*, p. 53.

²²⁴ Cameron et al., *Talking about God*, pp. 54–55.

²²⁵ Cameron et al., *Talking about God*, pp. 52–55.

²²⁶ Cameron et al., *Talking about God*, pp. 51–56.

more ‘intellectual’ as it is generally articulated in dialogue with critical studies and different disciplines.²²⁷ In TAR, these four voices work together, reflecting the many facets of embodied theology in practice.

Although I was inspired by TAR, the practicalities of my situation impeded my capacity to adopt TAR as my primary research method. As Cameron, Bhatti, Duce, Sweeney and Watkins note, TAR is ‘best done in teams’ as it is designed to be a way of collaborative partnership between groups.²²⁸ It requires extended preparation and effective teamwork whereby both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ teams learn from each other and can share leadership responsibilities. In Braedubh and Riverglebe I was perceived to be an outside expert and found it difficult to involve participants in a collaborative approach to theological reflection or action. They were more comfortable and more engaged expressing themselves in informal interactions as part of everyday life rather than formal reflections.

3.4 Autoethnography as a Method and Way of Being

I chose an autoethnographic approach to my research and writing as a result of an iterative process of recognising the complexity of immersive fieldwork with small rural churches and the necessity of using my voice and experience as a lens to examine both churches. Ethnographic methodology and practice offered examples that encouraged me to fully engage with the culture of Braedubh and Riverglebe. Autoethnography provided a means of articulating the depth of my involvement and examining my personal biases and responses to my experiences. In this section I identify the components of each discipline that shaped my approach to telling the stories of these churches and the people who shared my research journey.

3.4.1 Exploring Ethnography

At its most basic, ethnography is *writing* about people, *being* with people and *theorising* about people.²²⁹ It focuses on cultural, social or ethnic groups,

²²⁷ Cameron et al., *Talking about God*, pp. 54-56.

²²⁸ Cameron et al., *Talking about God*, p. 70.

²²⁹ Raymond Madden, *Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography*, 2nd edition, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2017), pp. 15-20.

recording rich descriptions of all aspects of life and experience within a local context. Ethnography has a complicated origin and history in anthropology and sociology, whereby researchers claimed to objectively record and interpret the local situation, while continuing to hold to their personal cultural bias, often championing the superiority of ‘Western’ civilisation.²³⁰ Modern ethnography encourages high levels of reflexivity and transparency, recognising that researchers are unable to maintain strict objectivity because they become part of the culture and social grouping they are studying.²³¹ Ethnographers strive for accuracy, while acknowledging their limited perspectives, presenting an account that is partial and subjective, but nonetheless true, insofar as it represents authentic engagement with a particular time, place and people.

Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen characterise ethnography using four adjectives: *humble*, *reflexive*, *collaborative* and *audacious*.²³² All four represent challenges and ideal goals. *Humility* is necessary throughout the entire process of ethnographic research. For my research, this meant acknowledging my limitations and ignorance about the local context. I put aside the persona or attitude of ‘the expert’, exercising curiosity and being willing to learn from people and experiences. As my research came to an end, I applied the same attitude as I shared my observations and reflections, accepting criticism or correction as required. Theologically, this approach resonates with New Testament epistolary encouragements to adopt humility and patience as a means of encouraging unity (Eph. 4:2-6).

Reflexivity is directly related to humility, described by Scharen and Vigen as ‘the courageous willingness to [be] changed by what one sees, hears, learns and observes.’²³³ As I engaged with the local churches I examined my preconceived ideas, constantly questioning my actions and my interpretations as I learned new

²³⁰ Although key figures in anthropology such as Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski and E. E. Evans-Pritchard actively worked towards recording local cultures and people accurately, they claimed objectivity, failing to recognise or acknowledge the contextuality, contingency and subjectivity of their observations and interpretations. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, ed. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, (London; New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. 10-11.

²³¹ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*, (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2008), p. 25-45.

²³² Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology*, p. 17.

²³³ Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology*, p. 19.

information.²³⁴ In the final stages of my research and writing, this included acknowledging the tension between my desire to encourage the churches and accurately and honestly reporting my findings. It also involved recognising the privileged position I occupied within Braedubh and Riverglebe and the influence I had within the local context and beyond as I shared the results of my research and my written thesis.²³⁵

The *collaborative* element of ethnographic research was found in the embodiment of lived experience *with* people. I had a responsibility to listen to the people who were part of Braedubh and Riverglebe. My autoethnographic voice and hermeneutic reflections on my experiences offered one lens for examining the churches, but many of my questions could only be answered in dialogue with those who belonged to the communities.²³⁶ They were co-authors of the research and I, as the researcher, required their contributions and involvement throughout the process, inviting them to share their stories in their own words and respond to my re-telling of their stories. It was a messy endeavour and one fraught with tensions as I made decisions about which voices to include in my final thesis, while recognising that each person had a unique perspective and interpretation of events and relationships.²³⁷

Scharen and Vigen describe the final component, *audacity*, as that which:

requires that the researcher be bold enough to claim that the work reveals truth—albeit partial—but nonetheless real and significant. Even more, this kind of revelation is not only theoretical or abstract, it is embodied in practices and in tangible interventions in the way things are. In other words, speaking truth involves pragmatic solidarity with those who suffer or are too often rendered invisible by the power structures of the world. Put simply, research that hopes to be both relevant and to speak to truth needs to consider the priorities and needs of the communities with which it hopes to work.²³⁸

²³⁴ Kim Etherington, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Using Our Selves in Research*, (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004), pp. 25-47.

²³⁵ Madden, *Being Ethnographic*, pp. 20-23.

²³⁶ James Clifford, 'Introduction', in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, (Berkeley: University of California, 1986), pp. 1-26, at p. 15.

²³⁷ Pam Shakespeare, 'Writing Ethnography', in *Writing Qualitative Research on Practice*, ed. Joy Higgs, Debbie Horsfall, and Sandra Grace, (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), pp. 95–104.

²³⁸ Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology*, p. 24.

This *audacity* must be rigorously grounded in the other three components – humility, reflexivity and collaboration – but is not just about research for the sake of research. Instead, it recognises the transformative or redemptive power of researching real issues with real people in real contexts and situations. It goes beyond ‘traditional’ ethnographic research, crossing into action research and, in my case, practical and applied theology such as that advocated by such scholars as Moschella, Cameron and Duce.²³⁹ As I immersed myself in my fieldwork and writing, I recognised opportunities to influence the trajectory of both churches and translate my experiences into a form that would draw attention to the lived reality of these rural churches and the plight of other rural churches in Scotland.

3.4.2 Arriving at Autoethnography

This combination of components and my realisation that I was my primary research tool led me to consider the importance of my embodied voice. Rather than attempt to manufacture a disembodied account of people, places and events, I was drawn to the ‘confessional’ style of ethnography designed to invite readers into the experience.²⁴⁰ Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis’ *Evocative Autoethnography* (2016) described the possibility of using autoethnographic storytelling as a means of encouraging ‘readers [to] become co-performers, examining their own lives by engaging with the story.’²⁴¹ I re-lived each moment as I wrote the story, while interpreting and making judgements about my observations and experiences as I decided what to include.²⁴² I wanted to use the stories I recorded to enable readers to follow my journey of accompanying these churches through the twenty-seven months of my fieldwork.

²³⁹ Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*; Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*; Helen Cameron and Catherine Duce, *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission: A Companion*, (London: SCM Press, 2013).

²⁴⁰ Madden, *Being Ethnographic*, pp. 166-69.

²⁴¹ Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*, *Writing Lives* 17, (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2016), p. 108.

²⁴² Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, Second edition, (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014), pp. 69-83; Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed, *Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011), pp. 201-42; Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice*, pp. 115-40.

Autoethnography draws on the foundations of ethnography, allowing the researcher to share her story as a lens through which readers are invited to immerse themselves in the experience and understand the extent of the researcher's connection and investment in the local context.²⁴³ Both qualitative research methods concentrate on 'human intentions, motivations, emotions and actions', offering 'nuanced, complex and specific knowledge about *particular* lives, experiences and relationships rather than *general* information about large groups of people.'²⁴⁴ Both require high levels of reflexivity and transparency, but while ethnography focuses primarily on 'the other', autoethnography includes a focus on the 'self' as an active participant and contributor who personally engages with the practices, beliefs, relationships and experiences that shape and influence culture.²⁴⁵ This approach gave me permission to articulate the complexity of my fieldwork and relationships with the people of Braedubh and Riverglebe as I navigated the messiness of changing status from 'outsider' to 'insider', or from 'incomer' to 'compere.'²⁴⁶

In practice, the value of autoethnographic fieldwork is found in writing. For my research, this included everything from quickly sketched notes or sentences on scraps of paper to notes taken during Sunday services, records of conversations, diary appointments, calendars, journal entries, emails, poems, mind maps, reports, detailed descriptions of people, places and events, minutes of meetings, newsletters and even fictionalised character sketches and vignettes.²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Tony E. Adams, Stacy Linn Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁴⁴ Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, *Autoethnography*, p. 21. Emphasis original.

²⁴⁵ Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, *Autoethnography*, pp. 21-67.

²⁴⁶ See chapter 6.

²⁴⁷ There are some excellent sources of guidance and advice in recording and writing ethnographic fieldwork, such as: Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*; Simon Coleman, 'On Remembering and Forgetting in Writing and Fieldwork', in *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: Writing Memory and Experience into Ethnography*, ed. Peter Collins and Anselma Gallinat, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 215–27; Peter Collins and Anselma Gallinat, 'The Ethnographic Self as Resource: An Introduction', in *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: Writing Memory and Experience into Ethnography*, ed. Peter Collins and Anselma Gallinat, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 1–22; Peter Collins, 'The Ethnographic Self as Resource?', in *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: Writing Memory and Experience into Ethnography*, ed. Peter Collins and Anselma Gallinat, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 78–94; Stephen E. Gregg, *Engaging with Living Religion: A Guide to Fieldwork in the Study of Religion*, (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015); Etherington, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher*; Joy Higgs, Debbie Horsfall, and Sandra Grace, eds., *Writing Qualitative Research on Practice*, (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009).

Every note or piece of writing represented a thought or experience which contributed to the overall shape of my research. As an autoethnographer I made interpretive choices at every stage of my writing, from what to include in my field notes to what to include in my thesis, reports and papers about my research.²⁴⁸ My thesis reveals a partial truth about Braedubh and Riverglebe, while also revealing some truths about my subjectivity, critical self-examination and reflexivity.

As Madden notes, “[b]eing with people in their everyday lives, through all their trials and tribulations, gives a great deal of experience to ethnographers, but it also enmeshes them into responsibilities and obligations to their participants.”²⁴⁹ I found a tension between the lived reality of informal conversations or observations gathered in my day-to-day existence, such as visiting the local shop or walking in the village and my explicitly ‘research-oriented’ activities or interactions. My embodied presence in the ‘field’ of churches, villages and interpersonal relationships of varying degrees was both a challenge and an opportunity.²⁵⁰ On the one hand, I gained deep insight into the situation by engaging interpersonally and emotionally with the lives of local people, on the other there was a danger of becoming so embedded in the communities of Braedubh and Riverglebe that I lost perspective and the ability to reflect critically on the situation and experiences which were part of my fieldwork. To mitigate this, I intentionally included reflexive autoethnographic elements in my fieldwork notes, journal entries, presentations and thesis.

3.5 Called to be a Witness: Theological Autoethnography

Deborah Gordon’s description of ethnographers as participant *witnesses* rather than *observers* offers a useful theological guide for the practice of ethnography.²⁵¹ As Gordon observes, this description is replete with

²⁴⁸ Cf. Kristen Ghodsee, *From Notes to Narrative: Writing Ethnographies That Everyone Can Read*, Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago, 2016).

²⁴⁹ Madden, *Being Ethnographic*, p. 76.

²⁵⁰ Madden, *Being Ethnographic*, pp. 81-86.

²⁵¹ Deborah Gordon, ‘Border Work: Feminist Ethnography and the Dissemination of Literacy’, in *Women Writing Culture*, ed. Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon, (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), pp. 373–89, at p. 383.

associations, ‘including informant, litigant, function of the Holy Ghost, and spectator’ which combine to make ‘a witness... less an observer than a teller—that is, one who translates what s/he sees and hears for an audience.’²⁵² In Gordon’s account of community research in New York she rightly notes the blurring between insider/outsider, informant/researcher, participant/observer, and the shifting power dynamics that are inherent in research that involves social action and ethnography. Researchers had practical responsibilities within the community, often faced with the difficulties of multiple demands on their time and changing roles within the organisation and community.²⁵³ Like them, I was present and active in my research and writing, navigating complicated relationships and changing roles as I worked with churches and the presbytery as their ‘Mission Development Research Student.’

While sociological or anthropological approaches influenced aspects of my writing, my thesis is explicitly grounded in Christian practical theology and missiology. Throughout my fieldwork I engaged in an ongoing cycle of action and reflection.²⁵⁴ I used my experiences or observations to inform my questions and highlight areas for further enquiry. As I reflected on what I learned and how I interpreted it, I adapted my responses accordingly and based my actions on what I understood about the situation. My approach to analysis included specifically Christian theological reflection and a process of discernment where I reflected prayerfully on my experiences, trusting in the leading of the Holy Spirit as I immersed myself in the lived reality of Braedubh and Riverglebe. As I wrote my notes and read books on rural mission and ministry, I prayed for the people and situations of Braedubh and Riverglebe, recognising a need for spiritual *and* relational sensitivity. As I presented my research and/or facilitated discussions around rural mission and ministry, I regularly included at least one prayer and asked questions such as, ‘How do we partner with God in serving our neighbours and the local community?’ Such questions and reflections formed an integral part of my analysis, in dialogue with the practical considerations of financial or

²⁵² Gordon, ‘Border Work’, p. 383.

²⁵³ Gordon, ‘Border Work’, p. 384.

²⁵⁴ In practical theology this cycle is known by many names, but all share the same components. For further details see: Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, pp. 81-95; Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, pp. 49-51; Elaine L. Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflections: Methods*, (London: SCM Press, 2005), p. 186; Green, *Let’s Do Theology*, pp. 19-37; Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 95 fig. 2.

human resources, and shaped my conclusions and recommendations. As a researcher and theologian, I had a responsibility to speak the ‘truth in love’, sharing the insights of my observations and reflections with honesty and sensitivity. This included self-critical reflexivity as I analysed and assessed my impact, honestly examining the implications of my presence and influence in the local context and in my research. As a result, I was able to witness the life and work of Braedubh and Riverglebe as a participant and bear witness as a researcher telling their stories.

3.6 Plotting My Research Story

An autoethnographic approach to researching rural churches reinforces the importance of narrative storytelling. My thesis uses stories from my fieldwork to express the complexity and ‘intricacy of congregational life.’²⁵⁵ In this way I ‘give meaning to identities, relationships, and experiences, [and...] create *relationships* between past and present, researchers and participants, writers and readers, tellers and audiences.’²⁵⁶ The process of reviewing and reflecting on each stage of my research is illustrated in the structure of my thesis, grounding it in my lived experiences as a way of communicating the importance of a contextualised approach to rural ministry and mission. My thesis presents the story of my research model in a series of five framing metaphors – Jigsaw, Choir, Compere, Storytelling and Prophetic Practice – each representing a different stage of my multi-method approach to immersive fieldwork.

3.6.1 Constructing a Jigsaw: Contextual Foundations

The first step in piecing together my research puzzle was orienting myself in the context of Braedubh and Riverglebe. During this season I was involved with conversations with the presbytery about their expectations for the research and their initial assessment of Braedubh and Riverglebe as case studies. I familiarised myself with the literature and history of the Church of Scotland, recognising that I was an outsider with limited knowledge of the structure or context of the national church, which formed an important interpretive

²⁵⁵ Hopewell, *Congregation*, p. 46.

²⁵⁶ Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, *Autoethnography*, p. 23.

framework for understanding the local and regional story of these churches. I gathered contextual information and data on Braedubh and Riverglebe, read publications on local history, walked around the local places, met local people and began gathering stories and impressions about the churches and communities.²⁵⁷ As I constructed a framework of detail and composed ‘thick’ descriptions of both case study churches and villages, I identified similarities and differences, recognising that each of my churches represented different but related experiences of rural mission and ministry. Each piece of information added depth and richness, helping me set the scene and describe the setting of my research.

3.6.2 Joining a Choir: Multi-Sensory Participation

As I arrived in Braedubh and oriented myself in the local context I was aware of perceived expectations of the ‘expert’ appointed by Crossbrae Presbytery. I was immediately identified as a newcomer to the churches and villages and treated accordingly. Attempting to maintain a professional distance would have created the ‘observer effect’ and fostered distrust among members of village and church communities who could be suspicious of outsiders.²⁵⁸ Instead, I chose to prioritise active participation, engaging with people and their practices as a fellow participant, inviting ‘objects’ of research to become ‘subjects’ and even ‘co-researchers’ who could directly influence the development of the research.²⁵⁹ I worked on building trust with the people who were a part of Braedubh and Riverglebe, knowing that trust and relationships would facilitate open communication. I adopted a *collaborative* and *humble* approach, to ‘allow the experience of the congregations to define [research] categories, rather than imposing a framework in advance.’²⁶⁰ To expand the metaphor, instead of acting like a soloist or guest conductor, I chose to join the choir as a member.

²⁵⁷ My questions and initial ethnographic observations were influenced by Scott L. Thumma's methods. Scott L. Thumma, ‘Methods for Congregational Study’, in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman et al., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 196–239.

²⁵⁸ Cameron and Duce, *Researching Practice*, pp. 51, 57-58.

²⁵⁹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 228.

²⁶⁰ Nancy L. Eiesland and R. Stephen Warner, ‘Ecology: Seeing the Congregation in Context’, in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, ed. Nancy Tatom Ammerman, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 40–77, at p. 43.

Over a period of eighteen months I invested time and effort in establishing rapport and becoming a member of local church and village community groups. I prioritised involvement in the day-to-day lives of local people, regularly attending Sunday worship and supporting local initiatives. I immersed myself in the experiences of the local area, asking questions and seeking a greater understanding of the challenges facing rural mission and ministry. I gathered initial impressions of people and places which matured over time as I built up a greater knowledge of the history and underlying emotional or relational associations with the churches and villages.

I shared my story and background to explain my interest in the churches and my desire to support both churches without being an outside expert who would ‘take over’ and impose change. I prioritised listening and asking questions, gathering the evidence I needed to develop my initial sense of what *appeared* to be the challenges and opportunities for mission and ministry in these rural parish churches.²⁶¹ These, in turn, provided a foundation for focusing my further questions and reflections on the key themes which were contextually relevant and appropriate.²⁶² By the end of my first eighteen months I had both literally and figuratively become a member of the choir, sharing in the joys and struggles of daily life in Braedubh and Riverglebe.

3.6.3 Becoming a Compere: Participatory Action and Facilitation

The transition from participant to active initiator and facilitator happened as a natural extension of my investment in the churches and communities. As a result of the trust I had established by coming alongside the people of Braedubh and Riverglebe, I was able to take a more active role in encouraging participation in a variety of initiatives. In each case, I considered the implications of my involvement, reflecting on my impact in the life of the church and community.

This stage of my research was influenced and informed by Theological Action Research (TAR), shaped in dialogue between the local context, relevant

²⁶¹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 94.

²⁶² Green, *Let's Do Theology*, p. 21; Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, pp. 94-96.

scholarship and my personal reflections, becoming a hybrid of local initiatives and researcher-led discussions and reflections.²⁶³ My research transcended the boundaries of participant observation, incorporating elements of action research as I supported, initiated and facilitated activities and conversations around change in response to my observations and reflections. As an ethnographer I held a unique position as an associate member of the community, sharing life together as an ‘insider’, while offering an ‘outside’ perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing these churches.²⁶⁴ Inviting participation from the local church and community members in reflection and discussion encouraged participant ‘ownership’ of initiatives.

3.6.4 Re-telling the Churches’ Stories: Reflective Reporting

Throughout my fieldwork I reported my findings, observations and reflections. I used stories to illustrate challenges and opportunities facing rural parish churches and reframing my experiences and observations to invite responses from participants. My initial presentations took place in March 2018, with updates, recommendations, discussions and ‘conference days’ during 2018 and 2019. The process of writing, reflecting and presenting aspects of my research to the local churches, the linkages, neighbouring churches and the presbytery led me to re-examine my findings and get valuable feedback from those in attendance. I saw these reports as an opportunity for engaging with theological reflection and interpretation of the situation and its context.²⁶⁵ As I re-told the story of these churches I recognised the layers of meaning behind my experiences, and intentionally used stories from other churches to provide examples of what ‘could be’ rather than focusing on what ‘had been.’

Although my research focused primarily on my participation and observations of external practices and interactions, I was investigating the system of belief and understanding of faith which provided a foundation for such practices.²⁶⁶ By asking questions about local church practice, I challenged participants to reflect

²⁶³ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), p. 58 n. 23.

²⁶⁴ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 166.

²⁶⁵ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 96.

²⁶⁶ Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, pp. 186-87.

on their own understanding of the meaning and purpose of their churches. As I retold the story of Braedubh and Riverglebe I brought together the themes and common elements from my fieldwork and reflections to offer my perspective on the possibilities for the future of rural mission and ministry in Scotland. I identified significant or valuable moments and events that provided perspectives on past actions and the possibility for future initiatives.²⁶⁷

3.6.5 Prophetic Practice: Application and Extrapolation

The final stage of my research directly addressed the wider context of rural mission and ministry as I reflected on the cumulative experience of my fieldwork and reflections. Drawing from my specific experiences, I focused on crafting a contextualised rural approach to mission in dialogue with scholarly discussion. In response to my overarching question, I used this stage of my research journey to extrapolate from the evidence to envision a future for rural mission and ministry in Scotland. In doing so, I demonstrate the importance of a contextualised, storied account of life in rural parish churches for the national church in Scotland.

3.7 Evaluating My Tools

An autoethnographic approach to research involving participant observation and action is open to criticism. My research into the future of rural mission and ministry is highly contextual, personal and interpretive, and as such requires a different approach to evaluating its quality, validity and impact. For example, Adams, Jones and Ellis list the following four goals for evaluating autoethnography:

- Making contributions to knowledge.
- Valuing the personal and experiential.
- Demonstrating the power, craft and responsibilities of stories and storytelling.
- Taking a relationally responsible approach to research practice and representation.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, p. 86.

²⁶⁸ Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, *Autoethnography*, p. 102.

Each goal is further defined as both descriptive/prescriptive and practical/theoretical, providing a guideline for autoethnographic research and a means of evaluating its outcomes. My research will have succeeded as a piece of autoethnography if it accurately portrays the nuances, particularity and complexity of my lived experience with these churches. It should celebrate participating in the lives and stories of those who have been part of the research journey. My goal is to present a well-crafted thesis that provides a perspective on rural mission and ministry, based in the local context, while protecting the identities and privacy of the people involved.

Articulating my experiences and process of analysis provides evidence for my conclusions and recommendations, without claiming to be the authoritative ‘expert’ on the future of mission and ministry in Braedubh and Riverglebe. My research is both valid and effective if it succeeds in ‘speaking the truth in love,’ in a way that is accessible, practical and sensitive, enabling participants and readers to experience a sense of *verisimilitude* or ‘truth’ in my thesis.²⁶⁹ I have a responsibility to the people in Braedubh and Riverglebe to tell their story well, and a responsibility to Crossbrae Presbytery, Church of Scotland and university to critically engage with the lived reality of the churches in answering my research question. I also have a duty of care towards the people who entrusted me with their thoughts, opinions and lives throughout the period of my fieldwork.

An additional criterion for evaluating my research and my thesis is *resonance*. This is the autoethnographic equivalent of generalisability whereby readers recognise parallels between the written account and their own experiences.²⁷⁰ My thesis presents a contextualised account of living with two parish churches in the Scottish Borders between October 2016 and February 2019. It records and interprets the complexity of the challenges facing rural mission and ministry in Braedubh and Riverglebe as specific case studies. For my thesis to be valid, it must *resonate* with those in the local area and beyond. The particular can inform the general as the evidence from my research provides insight into the

²⁶⁹ Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, *Autoethnography*, p. 85; Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, pp. 241-44.

²⁷⁰ Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, p. 237.

situation across Scotland. This includes assessing or reflecting on the practical impact of my involvement.

My thesis is based in *practical* theology. As such, my research ‘seeks to reflect critically and theologically on situations and to provide insights and strategies which will enable the movement towards faithful change.’²⁷¹ I have shared my observations, reflections and recommendations throughout my fieldwork and writing up. By incorporating elements of participatory action research, I have directly influenced the local situation. Therefore, evaluating my research requires investigating ‘research impact’ and reflecting on the possibilities for the ongoing influence of my research locally, regionally and nationally.

3.8 Summary: A Complete Toolbox

In this chapter I have traced the iterative development of my research methods in response to the contextual requirements of my fieldwork. I illustrated the complexity of my fieldwork by introducing the contributing components of *participation, reflexivity, interpretation, theistic theological reflection, and practice*. I have argued for the importance and validity of an autoethnographic storied approach to researching rural churches, prioritising my lived experience and recognising my need to engage in critical reflexivity. I have intentionally drawn a parallel between the language of *witnessing* in ethnography and the task of engaging in *missional* theological enquiry into the practices and beliefs of rural churches.

In this chapter I have described the representative guiding metaphors for each stage of my research, acknowledging their interdependence in providing a narrative structure to my thesis. I have introduced the evaluative criteria for my research, emphasising the importance of *resonance* as a foundational principle for assessing the validity and effectiveness of my research. By telling an embodied autoethnographic and reflexive story of these churches, I invite readers to identify with the experience and learn things which might be applied in their own contexts.²⁷² With this in mind, let the story begin as I began, by

²⁷¹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, p. 25.

²⁷² An approach that resonates with Vaughan S. Roberts and David Sims, who advocate using stories in leadership. Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, pp. 180-201.

piecing together the jigsaw puzzle of Braedubh and Riverglebe, two small rural churches in the Scottish Borders.

Chapter 4 Assembling the Jigsaw: Framing the Context as a Puzzler

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“Heather! It’s good to see you.”

“Thanks. It’s good to be here and support the church.” I gesture to the Remembrance display. “This is amazing. You’ve all put in so much work.”

As I stand with B— I take a closer look at the activity area that’s been set up for a more interactive experience of the exhibition. A WWII camp bed with blankets and a stone hot water bottle are clearly labelled, “DO NOT TOUCH” and I smile to myself at the thought that they are so precious now, and treated with such care, when they literally survived being ‘in the wars’. There are piles of knitted squares to be stitched together into blankets and knitting needles stabbed through balls of wool in a basket for making more. Some colouring pages are scattered on a low table, along with pens and pencils. Then I see it. A jigsaw puzzle of WWI memorabilia, recruitment posters and postcards.

“Oooo, that looks like a good one!”

“We’re hoping to get it finished before the display closes tomorrow afternoon.”

“1,000 pieces?”

“Every little bit helps. Go on, have a seat for a few minutes.”

“I really shouldn’t. I can be a bit obsessive about jigsaws.”

“That’s great! We need someone like that!”

I look around at the display. There are conversations happening and interactions between people that show me a different side to church and community life. Many of these church members are people I’ve had brief interactions with, but no real opportunity to talk and I would like to know more of their opinions and perspectives. If I’m going to be intentional about reflecting their perspectives, I need to spend more time with them.

I decide to hover for a bit and see if I can add a few pieces. I spot several pieces scattered across the boards and instantly recognise they belong together. B— looks at me with bright eyes and a knowing smile. B— leaves to tell another visitor about the beautiful box made by POWs in the local area while I put the pieces together and lay them on the board.

O— wanders over as I pick up a few more pieces and we begin chatting about changes in the church. [...]

“Glad to see you’re going to help with the jigsaw. I’m not keen on them myself but I like things to be finished.”

He heads off to converse with a new arrival and I realise that bending over the low table is causing pain in my back. Not only that, I have my back towards what is happening in the room. If I want to be able to observe the flow of the day and have the opportunity for conversations, I need to take a seat with my back to the wall so I can watch, and leave space on the seats for people who come into the corner for a break and a chat.

I take a proper look at the jigsaw and see a lot of empty space. B— has already done the hard part, laying out all the pieces face-up and constructing the border, but very little work has been done to fill in the middle. All the pieces are here, the frame has been assembled and the picture on the box shows the finished product, but there is a lot of work to do.

My autoethnographic research journey began when I was offered the studentship and first visited Braedubh and Riverglebe in 2016. I was introduced to a completely new context, given pieces of a puzzle that I had no frame of reference for and invited to take a seat at the proverbial table. As a newcomer to the Church of Scotland and to the Scottish Borders, I began by identifying the edge pieces, gradually filling in the centre as I found patterns or connecting details.

This chapter brings together the pieces of the puzzle as I assembled them in the early months of my fieldwork. In keeping with my methodological choice of autoethnography, I begin by introducing myself and my hermeneutic lens, foregrounding my role as researcher and research tool. I briefly describe the organisational structure and governance of the Church of Scotland as a means of establishing the background for my investigation of rural parish churches within the national church. I discuss general features of each church which make them suitable representatives of rural parish churches in Scotland. Moving from the general ‘edge pieces’ to the specific, I present profiles of both Braedubh and Riverglebe, filling in socio-historical and geographical details to present a recognisable picture of my case study churches. By progressing in this way I provide a framework for readers to orient themselves before continuing the story of my experiences in Braedubh and Riverglebe.

4.1 The ‘Dissectologist’ – Introducing the Researcher

The term ‘dissectologist’ was coined in 1985 by a group of people with an affinity for assembling jigsaw puzzles and a desire to share their hobby with

others. The Benevolent Confraternity of Dissectologists took their name from John Spilsbury's description of jigsaw puzzles as 'dissected maps' and now boasts several hundred members.²⁷³ The club chairman, David Shearer, refers to himself and others as people who '[love] the challenge of restoring order to the chaos of a disassembled puzzle.'²⁷⁴ I am one such person.

My approach to jigsaw puzzles involves a fair amount of work before I start piecing things together. I start by examining the box and identifying key areas to focus on, before beginning the long process of sorting through pieces to pick out the border edges. As I sort through the box, I use the various surfaces of my puzzle board or the table to lay non-edge pieces face up. These I group by dominant colour or pattern so I can complete sections at a time once the border is in place. The process of sorting through pieces, although seemingly mundane and pointless, gives me an opportunity to examine each piece and place it in the relevant area so it can be included at the right time. I often find myself joining pieces together during this process as I see corresponding pairs.

Once I have sorted through the entire box of pieces and picked out the corners and edge pieces, I take another close look at the box to ascertain which colours or patterns belong on the top or bottom and each side. I then focus on the pieces in front of me, looking for matches in shape, design and colour. Bit by bit, I complete the frame, although it can be easy to confuse pieces if they are the same colour and pattern, as well as being similar shapes. Such mistakes are often easy to spot, when one side is longer than the other, or the last remaining piece cannot fit in the empty space, but some remain until they are revealed by a poor fit with inner pieces that form a complete unit.

As a researcher, I am an integral part of the research model and I have a direct influence on the local context and outcomes of the research. The choices I make through the process of research and writing help shape and mould the final thesis. As such, I am both external to the jigsaw puzzle, acting as the

²⁷³ 'The BCD: Jigsaw Puzzling of All Varieties', accessed 12 January 2021, <https://www.thebcd.co.uk/about-us/>.

²⁷⁴ David Shearer, 'The Jigasaurus', accessed 12 January 2021, <http://www.thejigasaurus.com/jigasaurus/main.php>.

dissectologist, and part of the puzzle itself. My observations, my reflections and my actions are influenced by my background and experience.

There has been much discussion of the roles of the insider and outsider in ethnographic research.²⁷⁵ The first year of my research was a difficult balancing act where boundaries were blurred beyond the point of recognition. I was neither an outsider nor an insider, but some form of hybrid. On the one hand, I spent the vast majority of my life in churches, supplemented by several years of theological education; therefore, the doctrines and concepts of Christian life and Christian churches were familiar. On the other, I was a newcomer to the Church of Scotland. Much of the language was familiar, but I had slightly different concepts or associations for the same terms.

In the local community of Braedubh I found my position changing relatively quickly in comparison with other newcomers. As a Canadian I was a neutral person in the village, welcomed by everyone without the baggage of historic or family associations. I was equally welcomed by those with Scottish and English backgrounds. I had also lived in Scotland for long enough to have lost much of my Canadian accent and adapted to the Scottish cultural context. This meant I was able to follow conversations and recognise areas of tension that a newly arrived Canadian immigrant would miss completely. For example, one of my earliest conversations with a local community member involved reference to the village changing because of the English incomers. As a student of history, and someone who lived in the West Highlands, I was equally aware of the historic tension between English and Scottish landowners and modern resentment against English retirees buying holiday homes in rural Scotland and pricing locals out of the market without investing in the local villages socially or economically.

Within a very short timeframe I found myself referring to 'we' in discussing the situation in the churches or in conversation with those I encountered. On one level this was unintentional, a natural extension of the way in which I express my association with any group or organisation. On the other, it was an intentional choice as an expression of solidarity with the churches. As Abby Day

²⁷⁵ Some examples include: Ghodsee, *From Field Notes to Narrative*, pp. 18-21; Madden, *Being Ethnographic*, pp. 19-23, 76-80, 110.

observes, the ‘process of ethnography is, implicitly at least, predicated on a process of belonging.’²⁷⁶ I felt it was important to identify myself as one who would stand alongside the churches and walk with them. This became more important as I heard participants repeat thematic descriptions of marginalisation, isolation and abandonment. I knew it would be impossible for me to truly be an ‘insider’ in the local community for several reasons, most notably my inevitable departure at the end of my fieldwork; however, refraining from investing in the local community would alienate me from the people I was attempting to understand.

Sharing my personal life story and background was integral to the process of navigating my place in the churches. Prior to beginning my research with Braedubh and Riverglebe I participated in two interviews, one with the academic team at the University of Glasgow, and one with members of Crossbrae Presbytery. In both cases I was asked to share a little of my background as a way of determining my interest and commitment to the research. I was asked questions about my theological and sociological background, experience in Scottish churches, academic studies, Christian belief, ministry or mission experience and my perspective on revitalisation within local churches. My answers and the subsequent discussion led to the panel’s decision to offer me the PhD studentship.

On arriving in Braedubh, I was asked similar questions by church and community members who wanted to know about my life, family, employment and interests. My willingness and ability to share my story with people gave them the confidence to trust me with their stories and opinions. My background shapes my interpretive lens, so I include an extract of my presentation here.

I am a child of the manse, born in rural Alberta, Canada where my father was the minister of a small Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) church. I experienced life in rural ministry as part of a ministry family. When I was still a child my father suffered a breakdown and left full-time ministry. We remained involved in churches and I firmly believe church life is important. I remember deciding that I wanted to be a Christian

²⁷⁶ Day, *Religious Lives of Older Laywomen*, p. 20.

when I was 5 years old, although my teenage years included some challenging times and periods of apathy in my faith.

I left home at 19 after a difficult time at university and moved to Calgary where I joined a mega-church with a dynamic music ministry and a strong young adult community. I also returned to university, beginning my theological studies alongside a study of history. During those years I received training in teaching and discipleship, became a house group leader, planned several prayer retreats and sang in one of the worship teams.

In 2009 I left Canada, travelling to Scotland with my university chamber choir. After two months of travelling I decided to settle in the West Highlands as a 'Working Holidaymaker' and became a member of a small United Free church. Over the following six years I witnessed the church going through several transitions. They changed denominations, hired a minister, built an extension on the front of the building, entered a new vacancy and finally hired another minister. I sang in the worship group, taught Sunday School, participated in Bible studies, led services, wrote/performed sketches for Sunday services, participated in holiday clubs and served on the vacancy committee, among other things.

They became my family and remain a vital support network.

In 2011 I began an Honours degree in Theology with Highland Theological College - UHI and paid for my studies through a combination of working as a personal carer and working for a local funeral director. I completed my degree in Theology and moved to the University of Edinburgh for a Master's degree in Biblical Studies. During my studies I focused on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament with particular interest on the psalms of lament and imprecation. Throughout my academic journey I built friendships with people of different backgrounds and looked for opportunities to bring together my faith and studies in my daily life. I used my knowledge of the Bible and different denominations to develop my perspective on the importance of context and listening well in theological reflection.

Reflecting on the past as a means of understanding the present and planning for the future has been part of my journey over the past few years. I expect this to continue here....

I want to make it very clear that my role is not to 'take over' or 'fix' things. I am not a minister. I am a student....

I will be a participant and observer...

My focus will be on the things that you, as a church, identify... to do this, I need your help.

Sharing my personal story with the people of Braedubh and Riverglebe was a key part of beginning my fieldwork. It enabled me to establish a connection with

the members of the churches and Presbytery. They heard my story and, as a result, were willing to share their stories with me. As we navigated the complexities of the situation, both in terms of interpersonal relationships and the research itself, it became clear that my personal attributes and background provided my hermeneutic lens as well as the primary tool of my research.

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Time passes as I steadily work away, constructing sections at a time and beginning to fill in the empty space. People come and sit on the pews on either side. Some add bits in. Others just look on and comment, "Looks hard. Good for you."

I try to recruit people to contribute their perspectives. It can be easy to miss pieces because I'm looking for something else but moving my position or asking someone else to look usually helps. As much as possible I try to put pieces in their relative location within the frame so I can get a sense of the whole thing.

Section by section it starts to take shape and the empty space feels less intimidating. More people are willing to contribute their time and energy in finding a few pieces that fit in with what has already been constructed. Some are fascinated by a small section of the picture on the box and hunt for those pieces; or find an interesting piece and spend several minutes trying to work out where it might fit. Others are happy to look at what has been completed already and look for pieces that fill gaps. We all work together, each contributing a piece at a time until the last one is laid, and the puzzle is complete.

4.2 Unboxing the Jigsaw: Church of Scotland

Continuing the metaphor of working on a jigsaw puzzle, the Church of Scotland provides the box that held the pieces. In order to understand the background of my two case study churches and their challenges, I needed to grasp the historical, ideological, institutional and theological framework provided by the Church of Scotland as a national church and Presbyterian denomination. A close examination of church rules and regulations is beyond the purview of my thesis; however, my *experience* and *perception* of the Church of Scotland as an outsider and incomer shaped my understanding of the church and its relationship to the local presbytery and churches. It was further illuminated as I listened to the accounts of local people and their perceptions of the structure and support offered by the Church of Scotland to local churches.

4.2.1 Structure & Organisation

As an outsider entering the Church of Scotland, I needed to orient myself within the cultural and denominational context, as well as the local church. This included investigating the history and development of church identity and polity. One of the difficulties for such an investigation was the reality of the changing context within the Church of Scotland between 2016 and 2020. When my fieldwork began in 2016, four councils, made up of administrative staff, ministers, elders, church members and other interested parties, were commissioned by the General Assembly (GA) to carry out work at a national level and report to GA annually. The four councils were Mission and Discipleship, Ministries, Church and Society and World Mission. Alongside these councils was Crossreach, an organisation responsible for social care across Scotland under the oversight of the Church of Scotland and supported financially as a means of ministering to the needs of vulnerable people across the country. A selection of sub-councils and working groups with specific interests operated under the oversight of each council.

During the period of my research two independent publications reflected on the situation in Scotland and considered possibilities for the future.²⁷⁷ In 2019, a special commission delivered a report to the General Assembly which proposed a radical reorganisation of church structure.²⁷⁸ As a result of the Radical Action Plan,²⁷⁹ the four councils were merged into two forums in 2020: Faith Nurture and Faith Impact, supported by a variety of committees and departments.²⁸⁰ In addition to organisational reforms, the report also resulted in the creation of another special commission to investigate the effectiveness and efficiency of Presbyterian polity. As one person in Crossbrae Presbytery quipped, ‘We are Presbyterian enough to examine whether we want to be Presbyterian.’ As a

²⁷⁷ Brierley, *Growth Amidst Decline*, pp. 21-27; Gay, *Reforming the Kirk*, pp. 1-10.

²⁷⁸ David Fergusson et al., ‘Special Commission on Structural Reform’, Special Report, Order of Proceedings, (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, May 2019), https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/58401/Special_Commission_on_Structural_Reform_-_General_Assembly_2019.pdf.

²⁷⁹ Church of Scotland, ‘The Radical Action Plan’, *The Church of Scotland*, accessed 31 May 2019, <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/radical-action-plan>.

²⁸⁰ Church of Scotland, ‘Forums, Committees and Departments’, *The Church of Scotland*, accessed 14 March 2021, <https://churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/councils-committees-and-departments>.

result of these changes, my reflections on the influence of denominational culture in local churches are indicative rather than definitive.

As a newcomer to the Church of Scotland, I was unfamiliar with various elements of church structure and organisation. I spent the first year of my fieldwork puzzling over the relationship between different churches and the local presbytery, and between the local presbytery, the central offices at 121 George Street, and the General Assembly. In my explorations I discovered that very few church members understood the relationship. One church member described the presbytery as ‘a bunch of people who make decisions that affect us without telling us about them.’ My observations at board and session meetings, at presbytery and at committee meetings in 121 George Street reinforced this to some degree. I was unclear about how things were communicated throughout the structure. Although a representative from each church was present at presbytery meetings, they rarely spoke and there was little opportunity to share about the struggles or celebrations of individual churches. Likewise, I did not witness a report given to local boards and sessions about presbytery meetings during my first year.

4.2.2 What about Rural Churches?

When I began my research, I was co-opted as a member of the Rural Working Group (RWG) for the Church of Scotland, partly to facilitate dissemination of research and contribute to the discussions around rural churches, and partly to increase my understanding and awareness of the relationship between the Church of Scotland and local rural churches. The RWG was, ostensibly, a group of people with a particular interest in rural church ministry and mission, who have a responsibility to discuss issues which relate to rural churches and act in a supporting role for raising the profile of rural churches.²⁸¹ During the period of my research I participated in several ‘rural roadshows’ where representatives from the RWG travelled to different parts of Scotland to facilitate a workshop

²⁸¹ Within the structure of the Church of Scotland prior to 2020 the RWG was under the oversight of Congregational Learning, which, in turn, was under the oversight of the Mission and Discipleship Council. At the end of 2019 the RWG was dissolved as part of the reorganisation of the Church of Scotland, in line with the Radical Action Plan agreed at the General Assembly in May 2019. As of the time of writing, there is no comparative platform for rural churches within the Church of Scotland.

that included sharing Church of Scotland resources for ministry and mission alongside discussions of the challenges facing rural ministry. These discussions broadened my understanding of the situation in rural areas of Scotland, at the same time as they affirmed the importance of local, contextual approaches to mission and ministry.

The Church of Scotland, as represented by 121, has a difficult reputation among local rural churches and presbyteries. A sense of isolation from the central workings and decision-making of the Church of Scotland was a common theme throughout my time in the RWG and related consultations. My interactions with Braedubh, Riverglebe and Crossbrae Presbytery reinforced these perceptions. Elders and church members used words and phrases such as, ‘out to get us’; ‘[they] don’t care’, ‘only interested in city churches’, ‘behemoth of an organisation’, ‘cold’, ‘unfeeling’, ‘obstructive’ and ‘outdated dinosaur’ to describe 121.

The ‘Resourcing Rural Churches Roadshow’ was an RWG initiative for facilitating conversations among rural practitioners in different areas of Scotland in 2017 and 2018. The roadshows included coverage of the materials and resources produced by the Church of Scotland that might be adapted for local congregations, but it became clear that many were either inadequate or contextually inappropriate. Participants often shared more creative and innovative ideas that they had already implemented in their own parishes in response to the local situation. One church partitioned their building into smaller rooms and provided space for local businesses and community groups to use on a daily basis. Another congregation provided a community transport service for those without cars. One church refitted a portion of their building with second-hand soft furnishings and offered a ‘listening service’ three mornings each week where members of the congregation and wider community provided tea or coffee and sat with people who wanted to talk. Another congregation began a book club with volunteers who read to people who were losing their sight. On several occasions, participants asked how their stories might be shared in the wider church, expressing their frustration with the lack of publicity and attention given to rural ministry. When 43% of parishes in the

Church of Scotland are considered to be rural,²⁸² a £3,500 budget for a working group on rural interests was, to quote an attender at the RWG roadshow in Orkney, ‘beyond a joke.’²⁸³ Despite small congregational numbers, many rural churches in Scotland were on the forefront of creative missional engagement with their communities, but felt neglected by the national church.

This raised important questions in my mind about identity. Was it possible to feel like part of a united church when there was little communication between members? My literature review established that the Church of Scotland and theologians or religion scholars in Scotland had spent little time investing in researching or supporting rural parish churches. Despite anecdotal evidence of the positive impact of small rural churches across much of Scotland, many were faced with closure as a result of dwindling human and financial resources and increasingly frustrated by their sense of marginalisation and perceptions of the urban focus of the Church of Scotland.

4.3 The Puzzle Board: Crossbrae Presbytery

Several years ago I purchased a puzzle board as an alternative to laying out a jigsaw on my dining table. The board has a felt backing to keep pieces in place and comes with two removable trays for sorting out pieces. It unfolds to allow me to lay out and sort my puzzle pieces on the sides, leaving the centre clear to assemble the jigsaw. It is big enough to hold a 1,000 piece jigsaw comfortably and can be packed up for convenience to transport an unfinished puzzle to a new location, or pack it away until a more convenient time.

As a counterpoint to the national neglect of rural parish churches, Crossbrae Presbytery represented a supporting framework for my research. Their initiative in commissioning my research reinforced their commitment to localised rural parish ministry. They recognised the absence of research and specifically prioritised my appointment as a researcher. I was invited to reflect on the role and influence of Crossbrae Presbytery and specifically instructed to report on my

²⁸² A statistic generated by the RWG prior to my co-opted involvement in 2016 and used to promote the RWG. Church of Scotland, ‘Rural Church’, *The Church of Scotland*, accessed 9 February 2021, <https://churchofscotland.org.uk/connect/rural-church>.

²⁸³ Lack of clarity on the budget was a perennial problem for the RWG with various cuts and mixed information about what might or might not be included.

observations and recommendations for local churches and the presbytery as a whole.

As Crossbrae Presbytery was the initial driving force behind the research I was prepared to work closely with the Presbytery as well as the individual churches; however, I was unprepared for the vague and confusing perception of Presbytery among church members. During my fieldwork I found very little interaction or communication between local churches and the presbytery as a whole. Local church members struggled to articulate their understanding of the governance and structure of the Church of Scotland. There was little opportunity for the work, discussions and decisions of the local presbytery to be communicated to individual kirk sessions or church congregations. I was also puzzled by the lack of opportunity for reports from local churches within the formal meeting structure of Crossbrae Presbytery.

During my time in the Borders I attended several meetings and conference days with Crossbrae Presbytery. I found people who wanted to work together to see churches grow and flourish in Scotland but who were overwhelmed by the technical and legal or administrative requirements of the organisation. A few vocal individuals dominated discussions of policy or raised controversial issues in opposition to changes made by individual churches. Many others were largely passive observers, content to attend and support initiatives led by more vocal members.

As I became more familiar with the local area I discovered tensions between churches in the presbytery, either attributed to personality and relationships between individuals or to perceptions of 'sheep stealing' across parish boundaries when people chose to attend a church in a neighbouring village rather than their local church. Further tensions were apparent over presbytery planning and the creation of linkages or unions between churches. On several occasions I was informed that the linkage between Braedubh, Greyfield, Eastfield and Oxfield was 'not a natural linkage' and people felt they had been 'let down' by Crossbrae Presbytery. This sense of disillusionment or neglect and poor communication was evident within the membership of Riverglebe as well, particularly in relation to the closure and lack of provision for maintaining the care of the historic Kingriver building.

Members of local churches were uninterested in approaching Crossbrae Presbytery for help or support, in part due to misperception or misinformation about the role and function of the Presbytery. On one occasion I spoke with a church member about approaching the fabrics and properties convenors for Crossbrae Presbytery for assistance with the challenges of maintaining the building. During our conversation I reiterated that they were willing to provide support; however, such support would require individual churches to communicate with the presbytery and actively participate in finding and implementing a solution. I was surprised by the church member's reluctance to 'lift [their] head above the parapet' because they did not want to be 'roped into another job.' They perceived Crossbrae Presbytery to be an 'endless group of committees' that 'never [got] anything done' because they were 'short of people.' As a result, rather than asking for help, the church member struggled on in silent fear of being recruited or appointed to a committee.

The dynamic within presbytery meetings and between churches provided me with another group of pieces to frame my research and identify potential challenges for small rural churches. As a small presbytery, Crossbrae was beset by difficulties with few members, dwindling resources, lack of interest, interpersonal conflict and legal or administrative burdens. They were caught between national pressures originating from General Assembly or 121 and the daily requirements of local church ministry. Despite the perceptions of church members, they were a group of men and women with a desire to support local churches. They committed to funding my research based on their belief that rural parish ministry should be examined and addressed as a foundational component of the national witness of the Church of Scotland.

4.4 Sorting Out the Pieces: Why *these* Churches?

Before I start putting together a jigsaw, it is important to ensure that I have the correct pieces. As I sort through the pieces and turn them face up I begin grouping them according to colour. Are the pieces the right shape and colour-palette? Have I accidentally mixed up two jigsaw puzzles in the process of moving house?

In preparing for my research I was informed that Braedubh and Riverglebe were the two churches selected by Crossbrae Presbytery for this research as representative of the types of churches and ministries evident in rural Scotland. The churches were both rural, although to differing degrees, with small and ageing congregations. Both were located on the edge of local communities and navigating relationships with people in the community. Both churches were experiencing transition and during the period of my fieldwork I was able to participate in the process and development. Crossbrae Presbytery felt there was potential for change in both churches that should be witnessed and examined.

4.4.1 Rural?

My first consideration was rurality. My research was specifically intended to focus on rural parish church ministry. Were Braedubh and Riverglebe ‘rural’? I began this research with a clear understanding that my two case studies represented rural parish churches in rural villages. According to the classification system, using data released in May 2018, the population of the Scottish Borders is distributed as follows:

Table 2: Scottish Borders Rural-Urban

Local Authority	Large Urban Areas	Other Urban Areas	Access. Small Towns	Remote Small Towns	Very Remote Small Towns	Access. Rural	Remote Rural	Very Remote Rural
Scottish Borders	0.0%	25.1%	22.0%	6.0%	0.0%	36.1%	10.7%	0.0%

It is notable that there are no small towns or settlements which classify as ‘very remote’, but 47.8% of the population of the Scottish Borders lives in ‘rural’ or ‘remote’ areas.²⁸⁴ In terms of location and population, both villages were classified by the Scottish Government as ‘accessible rural’ settlements as the nearest settlement of more than 10,000 people was within a 30-minute drive;

²⁸⁴ St Andrew’s House Scottish Government, ‘Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification’.

however, upon arriving in the Borders, I discovered that social perceptions of rurality among local residents varied widely.²⁸⁵

The term ‘rural village’ could be clearly applied to Riverglebe as representative of a small rural village with an estimated population of 230 people. Riverglebe was designated as ‘accessible rural’, but had poor public transport provision, making it difficult for those without a car to travel to or from the village. The church membership included long-term local village residents, people from neighbouring villages such as Kingriver, landowners and farmers from the surrounding area. Most were deeply rooted in the land and local history.

Braedubh, with an estimated population of 1440 people, was officially classified as a ‘village’ but was often referred to by people in the local area as a small ‘town’, with new housing developments, a sizeable primary school, a relatively regular bus service and a close economic relationship with the nearby mill rather than agriculture. The church membership was largely comprised of those who remembered Braedubh as a smaller village, and regularly referred to it as such, although many felt Braedubh was becoming increasingly urban in nature and characterisation as a result of in-migration.²⁸⁶ The churches linked with Braedubh were in tiny rural villages, with estimated populations of 120 and 85 respectively, and several church members expressed their dissatisfaction over being linked with a *town* church. To quote one, ‘They’re just different. People don’t care about church and [Braedubh] is too big for people to know each other.’

Both churches represent elements of rural life and the tensions around changing society in Scotland. While Riverglebe still maintains the image of idyllic rural village charm with holiday homes, retired farm workers, farm machinery passing through the village and easily identifiable seasons in the surrounding fields, there are also many people who commute to a larger population centre for work. Braedubh may be more of a town, but the church maintains its rural agrarian roots with farmers and retired farm workers among its membership, representing a sociological divide between the church and village populations.

²⁸⁵ Woods, *Rural Geography*, pp. 10-15.

²⁸⁶ Woods, *Rural*, pp. 181-188.

Bridging the gap and navigating the changes is part of the challenge for mission and ministry in both churches. The contrast between them illustrates the diversity of small churches within the Church of Scotland.

4.4.2 Churches in Transition from 2016 to 2019

Both churches were going through a season of transition when I began my fieldwork. Both churches experienced a change in leadership, the development or implementation of new initiatives and problems with the fabric of the property and buildings. Additionally, Riverglebe went through a structural change in presbytery planning, as its previous links were changed and new links added. These challenges were consistent with situations facing small rural churches across Scotland.

At the beginning of my fieldwork Braedubh had been in vacancy²⁸⁷ for several years but was linked with two churches overseen by a locum minister. My arrival corresponded with the locum's retirement from the position, forcing the three churches to work together in finding a new minister with the support of an interim moderator. The vacancy committee represented different opinions and priorities among the church members, resulting in miscommunication and conflicting expectations for the type of minister they wanted in each church. During an informal meeting with the committee in the early months of my fieldwork, the interim moderator reported that one prospective minister withdrew their interest after visiting the churches and speaking with the members because they felt unequal to the task. As the minister observed, it would be impossible to serve in a charge that was unclear about its mission while simultaneously expecting a minister to fulfil every role.

The search for a minister continued through the course of my fieldwork. Braedubh and its linked churches appointed a part-time locum for a year to provide some consistency in service provision through the period of vacancy and called a minister in 2018. The final months of my fieldwork included walking

²⁸⁷ A term describing a church without a stipendiary ordained minister.

alongside the church members and new minister as they began discovering how to work together.

Riverglebe had been under the leadership of a single minister for forty years who retired immediately before my arrival. Riverglebe and its linked churches were redistributed among other charges by Crossbrae Presbytery. The neighbouring church, Kingriver, was closed and the congregation united with Riverglebe, which entered a linkage with a larger charge under the oversight of their existing minister and a retired minister who acted as an associate to ensure service provision across all four of the churches in the charge. For Riverglebe and Kingriver members the transition to a new style of leadership and a new personality was difficult for some and liberating for others.

The closure of the Kingriver building and its subsequent deterioration was a point of contention among Kingriver members. There were plans for selling the historic manse associated with Riverglebe with the money to be split between Riverglebe and Ellieneuk,²⁸⁸ the remaining church from the original linkage. During my fieldwork I participated in meetings with joint session meetings where elders had competing priorities, each focused on their perceived idea for the future of 'their' church. The minister facilitated discussions and supported local initiatives, encouraging stronger ties with the community.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, the minister announced [their] intention of retiring within the next five years. This led to consternation among some church members, particularly those of Riverglebe and Kingriver who had not been in vacancy for forty-three years. During my fieldwork, I facilitated conversations around sustainability and succession planning, emphasising the realities of the situation and the likelihood that it would be difficult to find a full-time stipendiary minister.²⁸⁹ At the end of my fieldwork, there were still plans to be made, but the conversation had started.

²⁸⁸ Further discussion of Ellieneuk will follow in Chapter 7

²⁸⁹ As Doug Gay observed in *Reforming the Kirk*, the number of vacancies far exceeds the number of available ministers and that trend is likely to continue as more ministers retire. Gay, *Reforming the Kirk*, p. 42.

4.5 Putting the Pieces Together: Constructing Local Pictures

I've chosen my jigsaw, opened the box, laid out the puzzle board and started sorting out the pieces. I've already begun joining pieces with clearly recognisable patterns, but now that I've turned them all face-up, it is time to put together the frame.

My usual approach to constructing a jigsaw begins with the borders. I find the edge pieces and corners to act as a structure for the rest of the jigsaw. In writing up my research, I began thinking of the profiles of each church as the necessary frame for providing context. Narratively, this provides both the setting and necessary expositional information for readers to engage with the story of my research and conclusions.

There were parallels and similarities between both churches, but as my research progressed I became more certain that the specific local contextuality and uniqueness of these churches and their people was a key factor in answering my research question. Each church, and village, has a unique character. What might the future look like for mission and ministry in *these* parish churches? How might their contextual particularity impact my interpretation and recommendations as I understood Braedubh and Riverglebe as 'places'?²⁹⁰

To answer this question, I needed to consider the buildings, village, people and history of each church. This means describing the physical presence, space and location of the churches and villages, the types of people and their relationships with each other and the history of the churches in relation to their local area. While there are components of each which are objective facts, my experience or perception of each provides a foundation for my descriptions, based on my journals and conversations with local people.

²⁹⁰ Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, pp. 22-32.

4.5.1 Introducing Braedubh and Riverglebe

To begin constructing the local picture, I started by comparing both churches and their respective villages. This is a quick reference guide to each church and village, highlighting their similarities and differences with an overview of statistical details and brief summaries of notable features.

Table 3: Church Profiles

Parish Church Overview	BRAEDUBH	RIVERGLEBE
Regular Attendance ²⁹¹	15-22	8-18 (fewer numbers on the 'extra' Sunday) ²⁹²
Age Demographic	Majority 65+, two 50+ and two 35+	Age range 55-85, mostly retired or retiring.
Services	Every week at 11am	Twice per month at 11am
Minister During Fieldwork	Interim Moderator until Sept. 2018 Part-time Locum from Sept. 2017-Aug. 2018 New minister inducted in Sept. 2018	Minister from Burnby appointed in August 2016 when Riverglebe linkage was changed. Assisted by a retired minister to ensure regular services across the linked churches.
History Of Ministers/Ministry Immediately Prior To My Fieldwork	Vacancy from 2013 2 ministers with short-term tenures, one who retired and another who returned to academia.	Minister retired after 40 years in parish. Oversaw 4 churches and held a monthly service in each.
Church Site/Building	Historic stone church with 12 th century architectural features. Rebuilt in 1572 with repairs and additions in 1705, 1747, 1876. Refurbished between 1907-1909 when the church hall, belfry and vestry were added.	Historic stone church rebuilt in 1593 but foundations may date to pre-1150. Repairs and additions in 1729, 1782, 1796, 1800, 1837. Complete interior and exterior refurbishment/rebuilding in 1910.

²⁹¹ Numbers include the minister, organist and myself.

²⁹² A second Sunday service was introduced in 2016 by the new incumbent minister to encourage fellowship and community formation. Prior to my fieldwork there was only one service per month.

	Situated in historic walled graveyard with a decorative arch and gate erected in 1910.	Situated in historic walled graveyard with Commonwealth war graves.
Capacity²⁹³	~500-550	~400-450
Church Hall	Yes	No
Kitchen/Servery	Yes	No
Toilets	Yes	Not onsite - In church rooms across the drive at the old manse
Manse	A modern house next to the old manse which is now a private dwelling.	Large historic manse with a walled garden, placed on the market in 2016 and sold in 2018.
Linkages/Unions	Linked with parish of Greyfield, Oxfield and Eastfield in 2012. Village churches in Greyfield and Oxfield have 9:30am services on alternate weeks. Association between Greyfield, Oxfield and Freshfield, a 'fresh expression' congregation in the village of Oxfield.	United with Kingriver in September 2016 following the closure of Kingriver church. Linked with Burnby and two other churches with regular services.
Church Guild	Yes	No
Messy Church	Yes	No

²⁹³ Estimate based on large events in both churches.

Table 4: Village Profiles

Village overview	BRAEDUBH	RIVERGLEBE
Population (est)²⁹⁴	~1440 - Resident in the village ~1900 - in the 'parish' ²⁹⁵	~240 ²⁹⁶
School	Large Primary School Built in 1937 approx. 170 students.	Small Primary School, Built in 1877 approx. 45 students
Medical practice	Yes	No
Churches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parish Church • Independent Evangelical Church (Northfield) 	Parish Church
Community hall	Yes	No
Local businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small Franchise food store • Village store/post office • Butcher • Seamstress • Art Shop/Framer • Pharmacy • Garage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Garage/ Car repair
Hospitality/food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chip Shop (open Thurs-Sat) • Community Café (Mon, Wed and Thurs mornings) • 2 pubs 	Hotel/Restaurant
Clubs/ community groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several sports clubs • Church Guild • Scottish Women's Institute (SWI) • 'Common Good' • Community Council • Parent/Teacher's Association • History Society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curling club • Horticultural Society • Community Council • Village Events (formed in 2017)

²⁹⁴ Estimate extrapolated from 2011 census data based on my experience of living in the local area.

²⁹⁵ According to the Church of Scotland's 'Statistics for Mission' which reflects parish linkages and includes neighbouring villages and outlying dwellings. Church of Scotland, 'Statistics for Mission', accessed 15 October 2016, <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/resources/stats-for-mission>.

²⁹⁶ There are no distinct statistics for Riverglebe in Scotland's Census 2011. It is grouped with several other villages or hamlets in government surveys as a 'small area population' data zone. Oliver O'Brien and James Cheshire, 'DataShine Scotland', 2016, accessed 11 December 2016, scotland.datashine.org.uk.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choir (formed in 2017) • History Society (formed in 2018)
Bus service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi -Regular services to/from larger population centres • Transfer point for services to smaller villages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morning/ Afternoon School bus for high school pupils

Each table includes details about the respective villages, but I quickly learned that these bare facts left me with little sense of the socially constructed character of each village. As I lived alongside the local people in Braedubh and spent extended periods of time in Riverglebe, walking and talking with village residents and church members, worshiping and working alongside them, I began to feel a sense of deepening understanding. I realised that the churches were entwined in the villages, but I would need to prioritise relationships in order to gather stories based on trust and shared experiences. I have presented an overview of facts here, but the richness of my fieldwork is in the stories. Much of the character of Braedubh and Riverglebe will be revealed as my thesis unfolds and I recount the stories of my life in the Borders.

4.5.2 Church Buildings

I first looked at the church buildings themselves. As Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank observe, parish church buildings can be representative and indicative of the local community.²⁹⁷ In Braedubh and Riverglebe, I found people who were deeply attached to *their* church as a building and a place that represented the ebb and flow of their lives.²⁹⁸ Despite poor attendance for regular services, the church building was a place for people to gather for school or community events. It was a visible representation of the witness of the Christian Church,²⁹⁹ even for those who did not regularly attend. The physical location of the church and its place in the community were closely related, particularly for those with little

²⁹⁷ Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, pp. 152-68.

²⁹⁸ John Inge refers to this as the temporal connection to the past. Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, pp. 123-39.

²⁹⁹ By which I mean the Church universal rather than a denomination.

understanding of the Christian faith who attended the church for special events or family weddings, baptisms and funerals.

The physical spaces told me a story about their use and development. The combination of exterior and interior features influenced my initial assessment of both churches, highlighting key areas for reflection, from the age and history of the buildings to the use of doors and layout of the pews.³⁰⁰ My emotional response to the buildings altered based on my experiences, reminding me that physical descriptions often pale in comparison to walking the floors and breathing the air. My perceptions of each church changed over the period of my fieldwork as events unfolded and I grew to know the people and the history. When I first started my fieldwork I found an air of neglect at Braedubh, conveyed in dust and the damp feel of stale air, while the exposed bulbs flickered and drafts blew across my knees as I sat in the pew. Riverglebe was light and airy but felt hollow as a handful of people sat scattered among the pews in the echoing space. By the end of my fieldwork I understood the dusty banner hung in Braedubh as a reminder of a young parent who died tragically and Riverglebe was haunted by my memories of Christmas concerts and choir practices where the sound of voices filled the air.

Both churches represented the continuity of centuries of Christian witness in Braedubh and Riverglebe. Evidence of their 12th century origins can be found in their stonework and foundations, although the current buildings and features are more recent, reflecting ongoing building works and refurbishments from 1572 (Braedubh) and 1593 (Riverglebe) to the extensive additions of 1907-1909 (Braedubh) or rebuilding in 1910 (Riverglebe).³⁰¹ They stand in historic graveyards on the edge of their villages, bearing witness to previous generations and representing stability in the passing of years. Throughout my research I was palpably aware of the long shadow of history represented by both churches.

The churches in Braedubh and Riverglebe are the buildings with the largest seating capacity in their villages, making them ideal spaces for community

³⁰⁰ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, Fortress Resources for Preaching, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 71-72.

³⁰¹ G. A. C. Binnie, *The Churches and Graveyards of Berwickshire*, (Berwick upon Tweed: Tweeddale Press, 1995), pp. 56-69, 400-14.

events. They are both large, each capable of comfortably seating 400+ people in the pews on the ground floor, provided they sit close together.³⁰² In addition, Braedubh has three galleries, although the west gallery is unused due to damp from the leaking roof and water course, and largely inaccessible due to bird droppings and other debris on the poorly maintained stairs. The east gallery holds the pipe organ and acts as a storage loft for Christmas decorations and unused or unwanted donations of books and toys but could be cleared for special events when extra seating was required. Riverglebe also has a small 'lairds gallery' accessed by an external stone staircase but it was used to store chairs and the wooden floor creaked alarmingly underfoot.³⁰³

The churches share many features. Both have high ceilings and tall windows. The bell is rung by the duty elder before the service, heard faintly from inside the building but echoing through the village. The furnishings provide a tangible link with the past, from the large wooden communion table to the stone baptismal font. Long wooden pews with seat cushion flank the aisles. The thick stone walls, galleries, high ceilings, lead-paned windows and old wooden doors contribute to drafts. An antiquated heating system of pipes run the length of alternate pews, providing localised heat, although care is needed as the pipes can be dangerously hot to the touch.

In Braedubh, Sunday services are regularly conducted in a chilly atmosphere and coats, jackets and scarves are commonly worn during the services, even in the height of summer, as the boiler is on for a short time to 'take the chill off' rather than heat the building. Riverglebe is often warmer, particularly for special events, but it is still common for people to wear several layers to services for warmth. The heating affects seating patterns as regular attenders try to find a pipe to keep their toes warm during the service.

In both churches a tall wooden pulpit occupies the centre of the south wall, positioned between tall south-facing windows. When a minister climbs the stairs to stand in the pulpit they are well positioned to see everyone in the church, including the galleries. The daylight shining through the windows illuminates

³⁰² The seating capacity would likely be reduced if the pews were removed and replaced by chairs.

³⁰³ The 'lairds gallery' was the private seating area for the local landowner and his family or guests.

the faces of the congregants, while equally obscuring the minister from view on bright mornings. Rather than climbing the stairs, some ministers choose to stand on the raised platform in front of the pulpit, preaching from a small lectern on the communion table or the larger lectern near the base of the stairs.

The significance of this choice may be interpreted in different ways. There is a prosaic reality that narrow carpeted stairs are difficult to navigate safely and the pulpits themselves are confined spaces with small doors between 6 feet and 10 feet above ground level. In some cases, ministers had a more symbolic desire to be closer to their congregations rather than ‘talking down’ to them or ‘talking over their heads.’ Use of the pulpit also varied depending on the service, with ministers standing at the lectern for funeral services and regularly climbing the stairs for Remembrance Day, Easter and Christmas services, conveying a level of formality in the way they used the space. This may also have been a practical choice, ensuring they could be seen and heard by the greater number of people who attended these services.

The interior layout of the churches reflects the centrality of preaching in the Reformed tradition. The pulpit forms the central focus point and people commonly sit in the pews in front of the pulpit, looking directly south. Pews face the pulpit from three directions in Braedubh, north, east and west, reflecting the T shape of the building. In Riverglebe the building is a modified L-shape with a large square space to the north and northwest of the pulpit and a small wing to the east. Pews to the north and east face the pulpit directly while pews on either side of the northwest aisle face the main door in the south wall. Binnie explains this as the result of an addition in 1873, reflecting the growing need for space to accommodate people who were sitting in the aisles.³⁰⁴ It serves as a useful illustration of the changes in the village and wider culture. In 2019, the entire population of Riverglebe could sit comfortably in the church with plenty of room to spare. It was difficult to imagine people sitting in the aisles in Riverglebe for a regular Sunday service, although I witnessed special occasions in both churches where there were few seats to be had and latecomers stood by the doors rather than try to find space.

³⁰⁴ Binnie, *Churches and Graveyards*, p. 401.

Despite the size of both buildings, they are not ideal community spaces for several reasons. Among them are poor accessibility from the road and poor or limited facilities. Riverglebe church stands in a walled graveyard with steps at each of the three access points. The nature of the graveyard prohibits groundworks to replace one of the sets of stairs with a ramp, effectively eliminating the possibility for including people with severely limited mobility. Braedubh is more accessible as there is a sloping path from the gate to the door, but it is long and many of the flagstones are uneven or somewhat unstable. Lichen forms a thin layer on the stones near the church building and can be very slippery when it is raining. Both churches have limited options for parking, further reducing the possibilities for people with poor mobility to attend services in person.

As an able-bodied person I was able to explore the buildings and access everything, but I was aware of the potential problems. Having worked as a personal carer for wheelchair users and people with limited mobility, I consciously looked at access, seating, toilet facilities, space for manoeuvring, sound systems and visibility. Much of the discussion around the future of rural churches involves consideration of accessibility and provision of appropriate facilities for ensuring inclusion.³⁰⁵ The problems with accessibility in both churches were a poor indication of care and hospitality for people. They may also represent a contributing factor in the declining numbers in both churches as people age and become less mobile.

The greatest physical difference between the churches in Braedubh and Riverglebe is in their available additional facilities. Braedubh has a light and airy church hall located on the north side of the building, attached to the church and forming an entrance hall to the central aisle. The tri-fold doors which separate the hall from the corridor can be folded back against the wall. There are moveable chairs and folding tables, a crate of children's toys, a piano, a bookcase and three double cupboards, allowing for multiple users, while the wooden floor can be easily cleaned between events. It offers flexibility, unlike the main portion of the church. The vestry has been converted into a small

³⁰⁵ The Arthur Rank Centre (ARC) has developed a toolkit to help rural churches with accessibility. Arthur Rank Centre, 'Accessible Welcome', *The Arthur Rank Centre*, accessed 17 March 2021, <https://arthurrankcentre.org.uk/mission/accessible-welcome/>.

kitchen and there is a basic disabled toilet as well as a small toilet in a converted cupboard. These modifications make Braedubh a useable space for events and activities, but the hall is underutilised, used for teas and coffees before services and for Messy Church every two months. This is likely due to a combination of the church's location on the edge of the village at the bottom of a long hill and the presence of a well-equipped community centre in the middle of the village. The church's size and proximity to the school makes it the best place for end-of-term services, but the location and lack of parking appear to be barriers to regular community use.

In contrast, Riverglebe has no attached facilities. There are no toilets, kitchen or servery and the vestry is an echoing chasm of dark and damp stone with a disused fireplace and a tall open fronted cupboard containing various pieces of silver or plate and the communion trays. Dusty boxes of children's toys, games and puzzles are piled up next to flower stands, old pews, tables and miscellaneous items that are part of church life. Each item has a story, but the room feels neglected and many of the items are unused or unwanted and should be cleared out. The back wall of the vestry is structurally unsound, sinking into the ground beneath and beginning to lean away from the main building, but plans for taking it down and rebuilding it have been delayed.

Despite the lack of facilities and poor access, Riverglebe is a more utilised community space, hosting regular weekly choir rehearsals and some community meetings in addition to concerts and school services. Riverglebe is the only large public building in the village, making it a priority to develop appropriate facilities. Plans were drafted during my fieldwork, but the administrative and logistical challenges of working the local council, getting approval from different committees and releasing the funds were complicated by the location and problems with accessibility. The current church occupies the same site as its 12th century antecedent making archaeological consultation and approval a requirement before excavation for the purposes of building an extension.

While both buildings are distinctive in various ways, there were two obvious symbolic differences that captured my attention and stimulated my reflections

about the ethos of the congregations:³⁰⁶ doors and crosses. Their doors and my experiences accessing each building corresponded to my experience of their openness to the community. In the following two extracts I recount my arrival at each church.

My first introduction to Braedubh church building was unpromising, as I arrived for a meeting with members of the local presbytery and I was unable to find an open door. I began by walking around the building, noticing the rich architectural features and looking at some of the memorial stones as I tried one door after another. I naturally began with the south facing door as it faced the main pathway and stood under a protective stone porch. (I later discovered this door was rarely used as it had been warped by the weather and no longer sealed properly.) I then continued along the path towards the school and tried the east facing door. This too was locked and there were cobwebs on the ring of the handle. The next door clearly led into an outbuilding, albeit one attached to the church wall, which I later discovered housed the boiler, and the next, up a set of lichen covered stone stairs looked as though it had not been opened in years. A steep step down to the path from the north side of the building brought me to the end of the church hall and a window that revealed a small kitchen. I followed the path around the corner to a set of narrow double doors with a Yale lock which I assumed to be the hall doors, but again, they were locked. As a last attempt I continued around the building to the western door, which I had previously dismissed as leading to the tower rather than into the church itself. Unsurprisingly, this too was locked. Having been thwarted by the lack of open doors I returned to the main gate to watch for people arriving who might have keys.

My experience of Riverglebe offered a complete contrast.

The bright red outer door stands slightly ajar and there is a metal grate for catching stones or mud before it can be tracked into the church. Another mat lies on the red tiled floor of the porch at the door into the church itself. A guestbook stands on the small entrance table and a notice on the door invites visitors to enter. A folded paper leaflet gives readers the history of the bell, while a small cork notice board holds a copy of the community newsletter and the weekly rota of duties. I

³⁰⁶ Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology*, p. 72.

duck my head below the stone lintel as I push open the inner door and enter the church, which is surprisingly light and airy.

As a symbolic representation of access, these doors symbolised potential barriers. I was confounded by the lack of clarity about which door to use at Braedubh, feeling disconcerted and unwelcomed despite having been invited to the church. At Riverglebe there was open transparency about accessing the church and I naturally went to the door at the top of the main path, but I would have been able to get in through the other door if I had tried it. Both porch entrances are unlocked at all times and the building is open to all visitors, regardless of the time or day of the week. As a result, I was predisposed to think of Riverglebe as more welcoming and Braedubh as more inaccessible.

The second symbol, the cross, was brought to my attention by the new minister at Riverglebe who was talking about a day when the school children had been invited to the church as part of their Religious Education component. The minister asked them to explore the church and grounds and come back with a list of things that indicated the building was a church. Some mentioned the stained-glass window or the memorial plaques and stones on the walls, others the bell or the organ and everyone mentioned the pews and pulpit, but there was no mention of a cross. In that moment the minister realised there was no cross in the building or outside.³⁰⁷ A few months later a simple cross was installed in the alcove above the pulpit.

In Braedubh, a large cross occupies pride of place behind the pulpit in the centre of the south wall. Flanked by tall windows and decorative brass sconces, the cross is clearly visible from anywhere in the church. As no one was able to tell me the history of the cross, it was reasonable to assume it had been in place since the refurbishment in 1907-1909, if not before. I was intrigued by the contrast, reflecting that the external sign of a cross could tell me little about the faith of the people attending the church, but might indicate the perceived importance of the cross in preceding years. As the Riverglebe minister had

³⁰⁷ As Frances Ward observes, familiarity or expectation can negatively affect our ability to observe artifacts. Frances Ward, 'Methodological Approaches: Practical Theology', in *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook*, ed. Helen Cameron et al., (London: SCM Press, 2005), pp. 23–35, at p. 27.

observed, the building and its artefacts serve as a witness to people in the church and community. A missing cross, coupled with the lack of pew Bibles, implied the church was more like a club or society than a Christian witness engaged in teaching or discipling congregants. A definitive conclusion required a more thorough investigation of the history and present practice among church members.

4.5.3 Church History

The history of both churches and their interactions with their villages provided a narrative commentary on the possibilities for mission and ministry in the area. I was interested in the ecclesial history and in the development of local histories in the villages, although my interest was limited by the purview of my research. It would be beyond the scope of my thesis to provide a detailed examination of the full historic background but there are moments in church history which provide key pieces of my contextual jigsaw. It is important for my research to recognise and acknowledge the legacy of ecclesial division and reconciliation underlying the relatively simple appearance of the parish church. Although ‘it’s aye been’ remains a favourite phrase in the region, particularly among church members, a cursory glance at local church history reveals that things may have been this way for several years, or even decades, but it certainly has not ‘always been’ the same.

The church narrative in Braedubh contradicts the myth of a halcyon time when everyone in the village attended the parish church.³⁰⁸ Instead, Braedubh has shared responsibility for Christian witness with multiple church or Christian worshipping communities in the immediate vicinity since the Covenanters were active in the area in the 1670s.³⁰⁹ A Reformed Presbyterian community built a church in the centre of Braedubh between 1780 and 1783 which was demolished and rebuilt in 1897-8.³¹⁰ A Christian Brethren community mission hall was established in Braedubh sometime before 1897, eventually becoming an

³⁰⁸ Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, pp. 15-17.

³⁰⁹ A conventicle (unauthorised gathering for worship in an open space, commonly a field or forest.) of approximately 3200 people was recorded in the local area in 1674. Binnie, *Churches and Graveyards*, p. 65.

³¹⁰ Binnie, *Churches and Graveyards*, p. 66.

independent Evangelical Church (Northfield) which was still active during my fieldwork.³¹¹

In 1919, the Reformed Presbyterian church joined with the United Free church. In 1952, their joint congregations were reunited with the parish church, although continued to meet in their own building on alternate weeks until 1973.³¹² The building was owned by the Church of Scotland as a result of the unification but sold to the Borders Regional Council in 1998 to be used as a community centre. A local community development group took over the management and responsibilities in 2014. It was reopened in 2016 after extensive redevelopment to ensure accessibility and suitable toilet facilities and now functions as a multi-purpose space hired by different groups, including Northfield Evangelical church, which needed more space for their Sunday morning services.

It was clear to me that the history of Braedubh's churches countered the wishful idea among parish church members of being the sole or primary church in the village. There was demonstrable evidence that village residents had attended different churches for generations and Northfield Evangelical church was continuing the pattern rather than 'stealing' people from the local parish. However, tracing the history of local churches highlighted the importance of location, history and status, illustrating a complicated relationship between the parish church and the community.

In Riverglebe the parish church was affected by the Disruption of 1843 when many of its members left the Church of Scotland to join the newly formed Free Church.³¹³ The Free Church began by meeting on the village green before building a new church overlooking the green and was well supported by villagers. Over the following years there was evidence of some rivalry between ministers of the two churches, most notably during WWI when the ministers in both churches were recruiting officers engaging in a competition over the number of recruits they signed up for the war effort.³¹⁴ There are 62 names on the Roll of

³¹¹ Binnie, *Churches and Graveyards*, pp. 56, 68-69.

³¹² Binnie, *Churches and Graveyards*, p. 66.

³¹³ Binnie, *Churches and Graveyards*, p. 412.

³¹⁴ Binnie, *Churches and Graveyards*, p. 404.

Honour in Riverglebe parish church, commemorating all who served in WWI and representing a large portion of the population of young men in the area. This story was still being related in the village during my fieldwork when the new minister asked village members about the apparent disconnect between the church and community. As I reflected on the legacy of these ministers' actions, I wondered if members of the community blamed the church for sending their sons and husbands to war. If so, the church would have been unable to provide support or respond well to the trauma and grief of war.

In 1932, the Free Church re-joined the parish church in Riverglebe and their building became the church hall for a period prior to being sold. As in Braedubh, the building was sold to the local authority for use as a village hall. It gradually fell into disrepair and was purchased by a private buyer prior to the start of my fieldwork. Throughout my fieldwork there were indications it was being renovated as a dwelling, but people bemoaned the loss of their village hall.

Tracing the history of both churches helped me piece together some of the underlying tensions in the local area. I learned that people had long memories, often telling or retelling the stories they had heard, although the details and interpretations varied. The complex relationships between churches and villagers reminded me to consider multiple perspectives. The range of opinions on the sale of the North Church in Braedubh reinforced my awareness of bias and the tendency of people to offer judgments based on incomplete knowledge or evidence, while simultaneously illustrating the possibility that multiple interpretations might still be valid.

4.5.4 Village and Community Life

Although my research originated with the churches, the jigsaw I was constructing required me to invest in understanding the local villages. They are the context for answering my question about the sustainability of rural mission and ministry. The geographical or territorial nature of parish ministry in Scotland *should* indicate that decisions about the future of churches should be made in relation to their locality. While both churches were similar in terms of their age demographic and patterns of attendance (see Table 3 in 4.5.1), their respective villages were very different. I also had different experiences of both

as I lived in Braedubh but was more actively involved in village activities in Riverglebe. For that reason, I am going to separate them in this section.

4.5.4.1 Braedubh

Braedubh is a large village of around 1440 people positioned between two larger towns. There is a main street on the top of a hill which acts as a high street for the few remaining shops or local businesses. A bypass skirts around the southern edge of the village, connecting to the western end of the high street as it descends a steep hill. The village is arranged like a rabbit warren made up of smaller groups of houses and developments, with the oldest houses along the high street on the top of the hill or on the edge of the village near the church. Newer developments are accessed from the bypass, making it possible for people to live in Braedubh without using the high street. Walking paths criss-cross through the village, providing access to the 'new' school at the bottom of the hill next to the church and connecting housing estates that did not share an access road.

People who lived in the village represent a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds. The Scottish census of 2011 records 61% employment for the parish across occupations ranging from management and administration to professionals, skilled trades, process operatives and hospitality. Only 10% of industrial employment was in agriculture. This was consistent with the historic association of the village with the local mill as the largest employer in the area rather than farming.

Many people who lived in Braedubh were *commuters*³¹⁵ who travelled to their place of work, either in one of the larger towns in the region or further afield. My neighbour in Braedubh was a *full-time dweller* working as an IT consultant for a London-based company who worked from home and travelled to London every few months, with a spouse who was a general practitioner based at a medical practice in a village 30 miles north-east. They represented the *lifestyle shifters*, people who chose to live in Braedubh as a quieter place to raise their children, away from the stresses and strains of city life. There were also many

³¹⁵ Cf. Walker, 'Belonging', pp. 86-89.

privacy seeking people in Braedubh who had limited contact with village groups, choosing to spend their evenings and weekends relaxing or working in their gardens after busy work weeks.

As I became more familiar with local people and village, I noticed an apparent divide between groups of people. My attention was drawn to larger patterns of relationship in the community. Petty disagreements could easily become significant when coupled with rumour and gossip. There was political and ideological friction between neighbours, and national pride remained a core issue, especially around elections, where Scottish residents expressed frustration with the prevalence and influence of ‘the English’ people who were ‘taking over’.³¹⁶ There were distinct class divisions between those from a more privileged background and those who survived on benefits. Both could be disparaging of the other, a trend which was magnified among those who looked at English or Eastern European immigrants to the area with suspicion.

One morning I encountered a *long-term established resident* and church member in the village shop and we walked down the hill together. They described Braedubh as ‘a city in a village’. The church member explained it by saying the village was comprised of many disparate groups of people, divided by nationality, location, economic status, social standing, employment, age and interests, but their underlying concern was about changing cultural mindsets and values.³¹⁷ Braedubh was no longer the village of their youth and lacked a sense of village unity and cultural identity.

As another local villager explained, in [their] opinion Braedubh was ‘rural but urbanising’, becoming more urban in terms of community identity and employment. This was partly due to changes in society at large, accelerated by people moving into Braedubh from more urban areas. The influence of social media, films and television contribute to changing perceptions of society, influencing the homogenisation of culture. At the same time, there is a rise in a romanticised or idealised idea of rurality perpetuated by programmes like ‘Escape to the Country’ where urban city-dwellers pursue a ‘quieter’ or less

³¹⁶ Cf. Jędręg and Nuttall, *White Settlers*, pp. 52.58.

³¹⁷ Cf. Woods, *Rural*, pp. 178-92.

stressful life.³¹⁸ In 2020, the rural idyll or fantasy received a boost with the rise of ‘Cottagecore,’ a term coined in 2018 and used to describe aspects of quaint rural living and the nostalgia of handicrafts or gardening.³¹⁹ As I lived in Braedubh and interacted with Riverglebe, I found both villages reflected this tension.

My own position in Braedubh was uncertain and I found it difficult to make connections across demographic groups in the village. Many of the groups within Braedubh appeared disconnected from each other and even in competition with each other. An inner core of people was involved in each and I struggled to piece together communication, often hearing about events or opportunities after they had happened. As a single woman with no children I was not part of the conversations at the school gate or involved in the parent groups. During the day I would spend time in the community café chatting with the regulars, most of whom were retired. I joined in with community lunches and attended fundraising coffee mornings. I went to the school for the Christmas fayre and helped with Scripture Union. Although I lived in the village and knew many of those who were actively involved in committees and clubs, I was an outsider who felt a minimal sense of ‘belonging’ in Braedubh apart from the relationships I developed with café regulars and church members.³²⁰

4.5.4.2 Riverglebe

Riverglebe village is significantly smaller than Braedubh with an estimated population of 240 people. It sits in a level plain surrounded by fields with a small river acting as a boundary as it runs parallel to the high street. A single road runs through the centre of the village from east to west. The east end forks near the war memorial with one branch passing the church and one passing the school before continuing into the countryside. The west end of the street joins the main road from the nearest large town, which then sweeps away from

³¹⁸ Escape to the Country is a BBC show first aired in 2002. ‘Escape to the Country’, accessed 18 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006vb2f>.

³¹⁹ Anita Rao Kashi, “Cottagecore” and the Rise of the Modern Rural Fantasy - BBC Culture’, 9 December 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20201208-cottagecore-and-the-rise-of-the-modern-rural-fantasy>.

³²⁰ Cf. Walker, ‘Belonging’, pp. 90-97.

the village on its way to connect other small villages or hamlets to the next large town.

Riverglebe is designed like an English country village, featuring a large green in the centre, comprised of a playpark for local children and two permanent football goalposts. Comedically, a large stone monument occupies pride of place in the centre of the green, adding an element of local flair to football games where experienced players use the monument to their advantage during practice matches.

There is visible disparity between households in the village with a range of houses reflecting the income and social status of their dwellers. There are some large or historic houses alongside small cottages. Former shops, such as the post office, are now private dwellings. Many of the houses surrounding the green are holiday lets or were purchased by incomers who retired to the area. A small low-income housing estate sits near the school. Proposals for a new housing development next to the school were greeted with mixed enthusiasm and demands for the developer to include some form of community building.

Although local industry has changed somewhat, farm vehicles navigating the high street are a common sight and local people recognise signs of changing seasons based on the sights, sounds and smells of the surrounding farms. There are no shops left in Riverglebe apart from a small mechanic next to the hotel and a haulage company on the edge of the village near the school. People from the surrounding area travel through Riverglebe on their way to and from bigger population centres where they work or do their shopping, rarely stopping in Riverglebe itself. The local hotel has a reputation for good food and drink, but at prices more suited to city people on holiday and those with higher incomes.

When I first arrived in Riverglebe I felt that the community had lost its heart. There were few opportunities for people in the community to associate with each other apart from the school and the horticultural society fair, unlike Braedubh, which had numerous events and activities organised by different groups. Riverglebe lacked a community space apart from the village green or the church, neither of which were utilised to their full potential.

As my research progressed, my involvement in Riverglebe community life became more intentional. I regularly took my laptop and notebook to sit in the local inn with a pot of tea. Locals who passed or stopped in for a pint in the afternoon or evening would involve me in their conversations. I participated in community groups and events, developing rapport with local villagers as well as church members. As a result, my perception of the community changed and I felt a sense of ‘belonging’ through relationships, events and activities, despite living elsewhere.³²¹

I was surprised by the mix of people in Riverglebe and reports that the nature of the community had changed drastically in the 15 or 20 years prior to my fieldwork. There was little clear evidence of local employment opportunities, reflecting the loss of local farms as they were purchased by larger conglomerates. Some individuals worked from home, others worked in the primary school and a few were employed by the small hotel, but the majority fell into three categories: commuters, retirees and unwaged people living on benefits. There were tensions between different groups, often expressed quietly in looks or private comments among ‘friends’ who shared the same socio-economic or cultural background. As in Braedubh, there was an undercurrent of suspicion of ‘the other,’ particularly those of English descent, among some of the people who had been in the village for generations. I later discovered that Riverglebe had historically been a village of farm workers with a large community of itinerant *travellers* who frequented the area.³²² Some stayed permanently, buying homes and raising their children alongside the farm workers while others drifted in and out of Riverglebe according to the seasons. This curious mix of temporary and permanent residents has continued to the present, mirrored in *visitors* to the hotel and holiday homes.

For such a small place, I was intrigued by the number of people who did not know their neighbours. I attributed it to a lack of community spaces or events reducing opportunities to connect with one another. During the course of my research I witnessed numerous changes and participated in new or resurrected initiatives, witnessing the formation of relational networks across social

³²¹ Cf. Walker, ‘Belonging’, pp. 90-97.

³²² Cf. Walker, ‘Belonging’, p. 87.

boundaries and becoming a part of the community. As I did, I began to recognise tensions between church and community members. The majority of church members did not live in the village itself but in the surrounding countryside. The few church members who lived in the village attended sporadically, maintaining their family association with the church. Several church members were invested in bridging gaps with the community, but I also heard stories from community members about church leaders who alienated the villagers, undermining the witness of the church in the village. To my mind, this indicated a potential opportunity for the church to prioritise reconciliation in the local area as a specific missional focus.

4.5.5 People

Having discussed the buildings, church histories and villages, gradually assembling the jigsaw puzzle of context for my research, I now move to the final pieces, introducing the types of people who regularly attend both churches and identify themselves as ‘belonging’ to the church. Each demonstrates one or more of the four elements of ‘belonging’ described by David Walker: with people, with places, through activities and one-off events.³²³ In the interests of preserving the anonymity of the people who generously shared their lives with me over the period of my research I will refrain from specific descriptions of individuals, so I present a narrative of types and characteristic features based on my observations and conversations:

- 1) Faithful, Regular Attenders
- 2) Community-oriented activists
- 3) Innovative Entrepreneurs
- 4) Fault-finders
- 5) Dutiful Volunteers

While I have separated them for categorisation, there was significant overlap between characteristic types, reflective of the complex relationships evident in

³²³ Cf. Walker, *God's Belongers*, pp. 18-28.

Riverglebe, Braedubh and many other small rural churches in the local area. Participants identified themselves and others with one or more of the classifications when I presented my findings to Braedubh and Riverglebe at the end of my fieldwork.

The first group of people are the *faithful, regular attenders* who have been involved with the church since their childhood. They are analogous to *long-term established residents* in rural areas.³²⁴ These people view Sunday service attendance as a regular part of their lives and tell stories of the days when their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were involved in the church. They regularly comment on the changes they have seen over the years and reminisce about the days when everything was different and ‘the church was the centre of the community.’³²⁵ This group is ageing and finding it more difficult to attend regularly, hindered by their health or reduced mobility and the inaccessibility of the church buildings. They are concerned about the future and sincerely ask me whether I ‘think the church will still be here in ten years.’³²⁶ They attend, even when the service is not to their tastes, because ‘attending church is what you do on a Sunday.’ They struggle with changes in routine, such as extra mid-week meetings, special events or activities, additional services or changing service times, because they are new; however, they will still try to remember and attend.

Another group are the *community-oriented activists*. They are typically involved in multiple groups, from the village hall committee to the parents’ group, the sports clubs, community council and village improvement society. They enjoy actively contributing to the local area and find a sense of fulfilment in planning and participating in events. Their involvement in these groups is often driven by the social element of having a common interest and common goal, reinforcing their sense of belonging through activities.³²⁷ Although some continually look for new ways of connecting with the community, members of this group are often overstretched and overwhelmed by the number of groups and activities which

³²⁴ Cf. Walker, ‘Belonging’, p. 87.

³²⁵ A familiar trope, although one I came to question as I examined local history. Cf. The discussion of church myths in Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, pp. 15-24.

³²⁶ One church member vocalised this question during a question and answer session at the Guild.

³²⁷ Cf. Walker, ‘Belonging’, pp. 92-93.

demand their time and attention. Long-serving members admit feeling a sense of duty and obligation to continue in their roles despite their increased limitations because ‘there is no one else’ who is willing or able to take on the role. This, in turn, makes some people in this group reticent about participating in any new initiative, either because it conflicts with their existing commitments or because they feel overburdened and unable to accept new responsibilities. Some regulate their church attendance according to their other social engagements, trying to maintain a sense of balance if they have had particularly busy weeks. They may also find themselves involved in large scale events that take an entire weekend and therefore do not attend church that weekend.

A few key individuals are *innovative risk-takers* or *entrepreneurs*, contributing new ideas and actively working towards developing new initiatives that will benefit the local community and increase the use of the church building. These individuals are excited about change and the possibilities for the future. Their enthusiasm can be infectious, but they can also struggle to maintain a new project if it is not supported by other people. As highly motivated visionaries, they tend to start implementing plans without communicating well or discussing the steps with other people. These individuals inspire others but can be discouraged or frustrated when change or participation does not happen as quickly as they might hope. In Braedubh and Riverglebe, these individuals are the primary actors behind community-facing initiatives such as choirs, Messy Church, village events and reinstating the village Gala Day. Their contribution is valued by church and community members, who regularly comment on their energy and enthusiasm. They are somewhat younger than the average age of the congregation and still have regular jobs or business commitments where they occupy leadership roles, which may partially explain their approach to change and innovation.

Another group are the *fault-finders*. They regularly comment on the lack of people attending services, limitations of toilet facilities, uncomfortable pews, the problems of sunlight blinding them as they face the windows during services, the length of sermons, choice of hymns, the temperature of the building, lack of communication, frustrations over finances, problems with accessibility, lack of pastoral visiting, tiny typeface in the hymnbook or newsletter, difficult relationships with other people and anything else that might be perceived as

bothersome or inconvenient. There are some legitimate difficulties and tensions within both churches, but the endless repetition of problems can cause discouragement among the church membership. These complaints often impact the overall tone of the conversation or group, undermining ministry and mission both within and outwith the church building or membership.

The *dutiful volunteers* are often elders with specific responsibilities for teas and coffees, greeting people at the door, ringing the bell, posting hymn numbers on the board and various other jobs. Some have been office bearers for decades, ordained into eldership under previous ministers and maintaining a sense of duty through the years. Among those I met, very few received training or instruction about the role of elders and those who had felt it was too long ago and too confusing. Most relied on the minister, locum or interim moderator to lead and provide initiative while others talked of conflicts with ministers over changes. Some felt suppressed by ministers who refused their suggestions or ideas, while others were uncomfortable with unilateral changes introduced by ministers with little consultation.

Both churches face challenges in attendance and congregational demographics. Average attendance for regular services ranges from 15-22 at Braedubh and 8-18 at Riverglebe. At Braedubh there are two regular attenders between the ages of 35-50, while the majority are between 65 and 85 years of age. Riverglebe has a slightly younger age demographic for regular services with several members between the ages of 55 and 65. In both churches, I was the youngest regular attender, noticeably changing the dynamic of the Sunday services as I participated in congregational singing or reading scripture during the service. Special services such as Remembrance Sunday can see attendance double or triple to 45-50 people in each church, but such occasions rarely impact regular weekly attendance. Many of those who attend these special services count themselves as church members, faithfully attending each year, but rarely participating in weekly Sunday worship or attending midweek meetings and activities.³²⁸

³²⁸ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead observe that general patterns of church attendance in Britain reflect this variation, complicating congregational analysis. Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, p. 47.

This overview of the types of people associated with the churches in Braedubh and Riverglebe is my attempt at identifying overarching patterns, but the small population of regular attenders in each church meant I had a limited representation of the people who would call themselves members, resulting in generalisations. In addition to these types, there is a significant percentage of people in both parishes who might be labelled as ‘nominal’, identifying as ‘Church of Scotland’ for the census and requesting a church wedding, baptism or funeral, without attending services.³²⁹ Results of the Scottish Census in 2011 indicate 747 out of 1,849 people in the Braedubh area identify as ‘Church of Scotland.’ Riverglebe is too small to be listed independently but results from DataShine Scotland indicate an average between 31.9% and 36.6% of residents in the two postal regions identify as ‘Church of Scotland’, suggesting a conservative estimate of approximately 77 to 88 people in the village.³³⁰

In terms of theological ‘belonging’, all four types were represented in Braedubh and Riverglebe to a greater or lesser extent.³³¹ In both churches, the majority of those who attended regular activities or ‘church’ events were deeply rooted in the ‘place’ of the parish.³³² Among regular weekly attenders, motivations for attending included social or relational interaction, a sense of place, time for personal reflection, ‘listening to a thoughtful talk and singing a few nice songs’ and a genuine desire to encounter God. Those who attended festival services spoke of them in terms of socio-cultural identity, occasionally expressing a sense of nostalgia or commenting on the ‘fitting’ nature of marking the passing seasons in the church. People who were unable to attend physical services or events expressed their sense of belonging to the church through personal relationships. Village residents who only entered the building for community events expressed strong opinions about ‘their church’ as a significant ‘place’³³³ in their lives. They would ask for church weddings, baptisms and funerals and recall other family

³²⁹ There are significant parallels with Linda Woodhead’s discussion of the importance of ‘nominal’ Anglicans. Linda Woodhead, “‘Nominals’ Are the Church’s Hidden Strength”, 26 April 2013, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2013/26-april/comment/opinion/nominals-are-the-church-s-hidden-strength> [accessed 18 March 2021].

³³⁰ O’Brien and Cheshire, ‘DataShine Scotland’.

³³¹ Cf. Walker, *God’s Belongers*, pp. 18-28.

³³² Cf. Rumsey, *Parish*, pp. 180-81.

³³³ Cf. Inge, *Christian Theology of Place*.

events, demonstrating what Alan Billings describes as ‘cultural Christianity.’³³⁴ On several occasions, the individuals involved had moved away from the area but returned to the place they associated with their family identity.

I found a range of different theological or faith positions among people in Braedubh and Riverglebe. Some spoke of their private faith and commitment to prayer. Others candidly explained that they did not believe in God but were committed to the church. Some attended every service and midweek gathering, expressing enthusiasm for discussion and prayer. Others expressed their conviction that attending church a few times in a month or year was plenty. Some would regularly invite other community members or visitors to services and events. A small group committed to a prayer initiative. A few were interested in Bible studies and discussions, while others dismissed them. One who did not believe in God was enthusiastic about church services and events, regularly encouraging others to attend. Another who rarely attended services in the parish church spoke to me at length about their personal beliefs and private Bible studies.

Among church attenders and village residents there was evidence of all four styles of faith identified by John Westerhoff: *experienced*, *affiliative*, *searching* and *owned*.³³⁵ *Experienced* faith was found among those who attended one-off events and school services or requested services to mark rites of passage. These experiences or encounters with the community of faith in the church were opportunities for them to begin forming their own ideas or recall their childhood memories.³³⁶ *Affiliative* or dependent faith was most evident among regular church attenders who participated in regular services and activities.³³⁷ Even those who denied believing in God were committed to the life of the church and reflected on the meaning of the message articulated in services and songs. I encountered *searching* faith among church members and village residents who asked me questions about church, the Bible, theology and their understanding of

³³⁴ Alan Billings, *Secular Lives, Sacred Hearts: The Role of the Church in a Time of No Religion*, (London: SPCK, 2004) p. 18.

³³⁵ John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 89.

³³⁶ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, pp. 91-93.

³³⁷ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, pp. 94-96.

Christianity.³³⁸ Some of those who regularly engaged in church services continued to question their assumptions and consider how faith might impact their lives, but I was more likely to find this *searching* outside the regular congregants. *Owned* faith, as defined by Westerhoff, is a witnessing faith based on personal commitment to a transformed identity.³³⁹ This was the least evident among my participants, which may be partly attributed to a cultural reticence to talk about ‘spiritual matters’ or ‘evangelise’ others. Braedubh church members were encouraged to talk about their faith with their neighbours but few members were actively involved in verbal witness, preferring to witness through service in initiatives such as Messy Church.

As I built relationships with people in the churches and villages, I discovered the complexity and nuance of individual personalities, stories and expressions of faith, defying my attempts to categorise them. As David Walker noted, ‘Christian belonging cannot simply be collapsed into the things that people commit themselves to doing, publicly or privately, on a regular basis.’³⁴⁰ Reasons for church association in Braedubh and Riverglebe might be social, moral, religious/spiritual or any personal combination of the three.³⁴¹ Likewise, people who did not regularly attend could not be dismissed as ‘unfaithful’ or ‘unchristian.’³⁴² The story was more complex.

4.6 Summary: Completing the Jigsaw?

The foundational work for my research and my thesis was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle of mixed pieces. In making choices about what to include I have also made choices about what to leave on the table. My jigsaw is incomplete but provides a frame for the rest of my research as I have offered descriptors of the components that informed the shape of my experiences in Braedubh and

³³⁸ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, pp. 96-97.

³³⁹ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, pp. 98-99.

³⁴⁰ Walker, *God's Belongers*, p. 76

³⁴¹ Heelas and Woodhead found it impossible to quantify or isolate religious or spiritual significance from moral or social reasons. Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, pp. 46–47.

³⁴² Aisthorpe, *The Invisible Church*, pp. 38–55.

Riverglebe. The contextual framing allows me to explore different ways of assembling pieces within a cohesive structure.

I have intentionally organised this chapter in order from the national to the regional and ended with the local and personal. In doing so I have narrowed the focus of my research, highlighting the importance of localised contextual experience and personal relationships. Both churches are located in villages at particular times in history and the people of the community and churches have a direct impact on the immediate and long-term future of mission and ministry in these areas. Through the next three chapters I focus on the local, the personal, the experiential and the relational, beginning with the practices and activities of the churches. I explore the current models of mission and ministry and draw conclusions about the sustainability of rural parish churches at a local and regional level before extrapolating from the local to the national in the final two chapters.

Chapter 5 Joining the Choir: Moving from Solo to Chorus

15-01-2017

My first rehearsal was intimidating. I had no idea what to expect as a newcomer to a well-established group who all knew the routine.

On my arrival, I was given a stack of music and K— indicated where I should sit between two of the established choir members.

As I sat down, I smiled at the women on either side of me and began looking through the repertoire of music. I only hoped I would be able to keep up and manage to blend in well with the group. I knew I could sing the music in front of me, but there is a difference between the ability to sing the notes and achieving the appropriate style and balance with a group of singers.

I kept my eyes on K— as director, beginning to understand the style of conducting K— preferred. I listened to K—'s instructions, advice and corrections concerning passages or phrases of music and adapted my singing choices accordingly.

As the evening progressed, I listened to the singers around me, picking up on the little indications of style and approach, identifying distinctive voices and developing a sense of the group as a complete choir.

As the rehearsal ended, I found myself in the middle of a mass of moving bodies as everyone stood up and began moving their chairs in a pre-orchestrated routine of clearing the room. Before I quite knew what had happened someone had picked up the chair I had been sitting on and rushed away with it.

I spoke with the women who had been sitting near me and others who were curious about my presence, asking questions about my singing background, where I lived, what I did, how old I was, whether I had a family...

By the end of the evening my back and sides were sore from the effort of holding myself properly and using my diaphragm to support long phrases and high notes, but I was also thrilled to have made it through the evening without disgracing myself. There was plenty I would need to work on, but it was a start.

In the previous chapter I assembled a contextual jigsaw, selecting pieces to frame my research and introduce my case study churches. In this chapter I use the metaphor of joining a choir to explore the existing situation in both churches

and villages. As I recount stories and experiences from my fieldwork, I begin identifying themes and ideas related to my research question. I reflect on the sustainability of the *current* models and practices of rural parish churches, using the ‘choir’ metaphor to illustrate six components of parish mission and ministry. I argue that these six - *Welcome, Repertoire, Leadership, Ensemble, Practice* and *Performance* - should provide a framework for critically evaluating rural churches.

The metaphor also corresponds with my embodied experience as a researcher. The experience of singing with a choir illustrates the extent to which my involvement in Braedubh and Riverglebe included every aspect of my personhood. As I lived among the people and breathed the same air, I was privileged to witness their relationships with each other and the extent to which the physical trappings of buildings and relationships both revealed and concealed their underlying assumptions about mission and ministry. The ‘four voices of theology’ - *normative, espoused, operant* and *formal* - offered some guidance by reminding me that I needed to look beyond the *normative* theology of church services and sermons to consider the *espoused* or privately articulated beliefs of church members and the *operant* theology of their actions as I engaged in the *formal* theology of my research and academic dialogue.³⁴³ My perceptions were challenged and changed during the process as I engaged relationally with people, learning to interpret the unspoken aspects of church and community life.

By presenting this chapter as a testimony to my embodied experience as a researcher and participant, I invite readers to enter into the experience and engage with my reflections and interpretations. Each of the illustrations I have chosen represents an important aspect of my journey in engaging with Braedubh and Riverglebe. They are indicative rather than exhaustive, recognising the limitations of mere words to convey the entirety of church and community life over an extended period.

³⁴³ Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, pp. 51–56.

5.1 Welcome: Impressions are Important

First impressions of people or situations can define relationships and experiences. It has often been said that there is ‘no second chance to make a first impression’ and the same applies for churches. My first Sunday in each church gave me an opportunity to experience the church as a newcomer or outsider, albeit one with a unique perspective and background. What would their welcome be like and how would I feel as a newcomer? What would I notice? Would I want to return?

In this section I use extracts from my journals and notes to recreate my first encounter with Braedubh, Riverglebe and the Messy Church group. I highlight my emotional and intellectual responses, drawing parallels between my experience and that of a first-time visitor. I argue that a church’s welcome is indicative of their priorities and should be viewed as a key aspect of mission and ministry.

5.1.1 Braedubh

My first introduction to the Braedubh building and my struggle to find an open door left me with an impression of uncertainty over the nature of the welcome I might expect on a Sunday morning. Would there be an indication of which door to use, or would I need to rely on my existing knowledge? As I walked up the path I looked in vain for a sign before walking to the hall door. I entered through the half open door, walking into the dark, narrow, high-ceilinged corridor between the kitchen and the closed dividing wall to the hall. A church member stood at the opposite end near the door to the main church as if guarding the entrance and the table of hymnbooks. Another church member entered just behind me and stood to one side. We all looked at each other in silence and no one spoke. I was unsure of the normal routine and hoping for some sort of greeting or welcome which failed to materialise leaving me feeling uncomfortable and unwelcome.

In the absence of any clear direction or welcome I entered the church to look for a place to sit. As I entered, I looked at the people already scattered among the pews, most of whom turned and watched me in silence. It was eerie. What

were they thinking? Should I smile and say hello? Where should I sit? My previous church experience taught me to be wary of sitting in 'someone's pew'. I gravitated towards the one person I had met a few days earlier who responded with a smile and a greeting and I took a deep breath of relief as I sat down.

A draft made me shiver and the unfamiliarity of the building and the lack of welcome made me feel colder. As I looked around I noticed dust on the banners and light fittings, lending an air of neglect to my impressions of the church as a dark and cold place, a sharp contrast to the bright autumn sun outside. The cold and vaguely gloomy aspect of the interior of the church was emphasised by the number of people wrapped in their coats.

I hoped for tea or coffee after the service so I could meet a few people and begin familiarising myself with the church members, but I was disappointed. People filed out, shaking the visiting minister's hand and continuing out the door as they left the building. I waited and watched, chatting briefly with the one church member I knew before following the others out the door. In the corridor the minister greeted me with enthusiasm and curiosity, identifying me as a newcomer and enquiring about my presence. After the brief conversation I felt much more comfortable, encouraged by the minister's welcome, although my impressions of the church members left much to be desired.

As I left the building, I felt disheartened by the lack of connection with church members and the sense of neglect I felt in the dusty atmosphere of the church. My overwhelming sense of discouragement was exacerbated by leaving my support structure and community behind to enter a fieldwork situation in an unfamiliar church and an unfamiliar part of the country. I was a newcomer to Braedubh with a responsibility to my studies, but I felt isolated and lonely, unwelcomed and uncertain about the coming years. Was this really a place I had agreed to spend two years studying? I reflected that I would have been unlikely to return to Braedubh church if I were not committed to carrying out my fieldwork.

5.1.2 Messy Church

The welcome I found in the Messy Church gathering was a stark contrast with my experience of the normal Sunday service in Braedubh. Multiple factors contributed to my sense of comfort. I had been invited by the leader, who made an effort to put a note through my door when [they] knew I had just moved into the village. I responded by arriving early, hoping for some sort of connection to counterbalance the loneliness I felt after the morning. The leader welcomed me gladly and gave me jobs to do while maintaining a flow of conversation about who I was and what I was experiencing as a newcomer to the area.

I was able to meet other people gradually as they arrived. Each person introduced themselves at some point in the course of the afternoon, and everyone wore nametags, making it easier for me to remember who everyone was in the midst of the chaos. People were interested in knowing who I was and what I was doing, involving me in conversations and asking questions. I was able to ask them questions about the village and about Messy Church. In the hustle and bustle of the afternoon I relaxed and started feeling better about moving to Braedubh.

5.1.3 Riverglebe

My impressions of Riverglebe's welcome began as I walked up the front path. An elder stood outside the front door to greet people, directing me inside where another elder handed me a printed order of service along with a copy of the hymnbook. The space was open and bright and the few people scattered among the pews smiled a greeting and chatted quietly among themselves. There was a general air of welcome, helped by the physical space and brightness.

During the beginning of the service the minister introduced me as the 'mission development researcher' working with Crossbrae Presbytery and studying Riverglebe church. There were some curious looks and I wondered if I would have a chance to speak to people after the service as I noticed there was no provision for tea or coffee. At the end of the service the minister moved to the door and I spoke with a few people who were interested in knowing more about my presence. The layout of the building made it easier to stand and chat with

people in the open space near the door, but I still felt like an outsider and missed having time for tea and coffee.

My experiences at Riverglebe were more positive than Braedubh for a number of reasons. I felt more confident in knowing what to expect. By the time I attended my first service at Riverglebe I had already been in the Borders for a few months and familiarising myself with the regular form of services. Being introduced by the minister gave me a sense of belonging, while conveying something of my role to the church members, which piqued their interest. Rather than being a complete ‘outsider’, or unknown visitor, I had a legitimate reason for being in the church.

5.1.4 Making a Good Impression

A good first impression can influence a person’s perceptions. Many of the recommendations for revitalising churches or connecting with communities emphasise the importance of creating a welcoming environment both practically and relationally.³⁴⁴ In April 2017, Braedubh held a stewardship conference day on ‘Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones’ facilitated by the Church of Scotland stewardship consultants Margot Robertson and Fiona Penny. They highlighted ‘welcome’ as a priority for the church to develop, noting a marked difference between their impressions of the physical building and the people who were eager to participate in the day. Among their recommendations were points about clear signage, having tea and coffee before the service and opening partition wall between the church hall and corridor to make the space more inviting. Over the succeeding months and years, Braedubh implemented these recommendations. Each small change contributed to improving the impression Braedubh gave to new visitors.

However, as I discovered in my fieldwork, the physical space and atmosphere was secondary to the impression given by people. In Riverglebe and in Messy Church, a personal greeting made me feel more comfortable and relaxed from the outset. Although I was an outsider in both situations, I was invited in with a

³⁴⁴ Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, pp. 178-81; Arthur Rank Centre, ‘Accessible Welcome’, *The Arthur Rank Centre*, accessed 17 March 2021, <https://arthurrankcentre.org.uk/mission/accessible-welcome/>.

clear direction about what to do and, although still uncertain, felt as though I were welcome. People expressed their interest and I responded accordingly. I was given space to find my footing and be involved as much or as little as I felt comfortable being. As a result, I was naturally predisposed towards viewing Riverglebe and Messy Church in a positive light.

During my fieldwork I witnessed visitors come to both parish churches and closely observed their experiences. Some were not greeted at the door, left to linger on the fringes of a busy social group gathered around tea and coffee, looking tense and anxious with stiff shoulders and quick glances towards the group. As they shuffled their feet and took tentative steps towards the door or looked at the hymnbooks it was obvious they were uncertain and uncomfortable. Others were greeted, given a cup of tea and invited to join in conversation, visibly relaxing as they were given a hymnbook, an order of service and an overview of the morning. Of the two, the second group were more likely to engage in conversation, often expressing their thanks, and return for another service or recommend the church to other people. On one occasion a visitor was so impressed by the hospitality and pre-service refreshments at Riverglebe they remarked, 'I'm going to recommend this to my church at home.'

Rural parish churches should prioritise the way they welcome people into their buildings and into their services. While they may have few visitors in the normal course of a year, they should be prepared and actively aware of the impression they give to those few. To that end, I strongly advise training those with responsibilities for welcoming people at the door and encouraging all church members to participate in providing hospitality by greeting people and inviting them to sit with them. I also recommend that churches evaluate the accessibility and general condition of their buildings. As the partner of one church member observed after an extensive 'spring clean' of Braedubh, 'the church feels better, like it's actually cared for instead of abandoned.' The combination of physical spaces, clear instructions and personal greetings make or break a 'good impression'.

5.2 Repertoire: Framework and Foundation

A first impression offers a limited view of a church. Over the successive months and years, I participated in services, events, activities and personal conversations, looking for clues about the underlying beliefs and values of people in the church and their understanding of mission and ministry. I came to think of this as looking for the church's repertoire.

In a repertoire-based choir, like the first one I joined in the Borders, the library of music indicates the type of choir they are, what style of music they sing, what a concert includes and how singers should develop their own singing to blend with the group. Members joined and stayed with the choir because they liked the music, the people and the concerts. Many had favourite pieces but were willing to sing things they did not like when they were balanced by 'good' choices. I would regularly assume that a piece was new because it was unfamiliar to me, not realising that it had been part of the choir's repertoire for many years. Such pieces were rarely rehearsed, with an assumption that they would be fine because they had previously been learned and performed. The choir's repertoire, therefore, represented their history and identity as well as the content of their concerts.

In translating this to a church setting, the core beliefs and values of a church provide structure and direction. A shared vision or goal facilitates participation and growth. I began with a framework of foundational beliefs and concepts about *mission* and *rural parish ministry*, wondering how they might be evident in the practices of my case study churches. I found people struggled to articulate their beliefs in relation to church in a group setting, but could be eloquent in private conversations, expressing their opinions about the church's failings (usually associated with a minister) and their doubts or hopes about the future. Elders talked about being tired and discouraged by years of decline. Members and elders expressed their disappointment or frustration with a lack of pastoral care or ministry initiatives but failed to act on implementing plans.

In Braedubh and Riverglebe I found a lack of clarity or understanding about the meaning and purpose of church beyond attending services. Participants had not previously considered the meaning behind church practices or initiatives, nor did

they have a frame of reference for considering the role of the church in providing spiritual or pastoral care for those in the surrounding area. Reasons for attending ranged from maintaining family traditions, to fostering social connections and growing in personal faith. To adapt my choir analogy to Sunday worship, people were not singing from the same hymn sheet, relying on others to carry the tune and unable to join in. 'Church' was a place where people participated in a regular shared activity, but there was no established repertoire for the church as a whole in relation to mission and ministry. As a result, Braedubh and Riverglebe appeared to struggle with their identity and calling as parish churches.

5.3 Leadership: Who is 'In Charge'?

In a choir there is a clearly defined 'leader' in the person of the choir director. The director commonly selects the repertoire, sometimes in consultation with a committee, and leads the choir through rehearsals and performances. They make choices about the musical interpretation of a piece and ensure everyone is on the same page. In rural Scottish parish churches like Braedubh and Riverglebe, the minister is the visible leader.

In addition to a director, many choirs have committees and accompanists who actively support the director and the choir members. Accompanists provide a musical foundation that supports the choir members while committee members usually provide practical assistance, often representing their voice part, acting as a leader in their section for smaller and more specific rehearsals to work on individual phrases or details. Together they contribute to the overall direction of the choir, usually advising the leader on developments or concerns raised by choir members and implementing the director's notes while actively preparing for concert performances. I envisioned the elders in these roles, supporting the minister and congregation while ensuring consistency in communication and implementation.

However, while the metaphor worked conceptually and appears to offer a useful illustration of what *could be* in rural parish churches, the reality I witnessed was more challenging. I found ministers who were overwhelmed by the weight of expectations and unable to delegate to elders who were unprepared and poorly

equipped. Despite their best intentions, both Braedubh and Riverglebe suffered from a lack of collaborative engagement, training and support, which impeded leadership development for clergy, elders and church members.

5.3.1 Choir Director = Minister?

The minister's leadership role was most clearly evident in Sunday services where the minister had the visible position at the centre of the service, but I found it echoed in kirk session meetings and discussions. In every situation I witnessed the minister had the final word in decisions about the direction of the church. Church elders in Braedubh expressed their hope that a new minister would come who would have a vision and plan for the future of the church. They talked about their unwillingness to start initiatives without a minister, in case that minister had their own ideas. Church members *expected* the minister to be a central figure who carried out the mission and ministry of the church, presiding over services, carrying out pastoral care visits, coordinating community involvement, providing spiritual direction and overseeing practical details.

My fieldwork demonstrated the impossibility for ministers to fulfil this expectation, particularly with multiple linked parish churches, and indicated it negatively impacted the capacity of each church to engage in mission and ministry.³⁴⁵ Each of the linked churches connected with Braedubh and Riverglebe had their own perception of what the minister should or should not do for *their* church and community. The minister was synonymous with the church; therefore, it was not mission or ministry unless the minister was directly involved and did not have the same weight or authority. These conflicting expectations, particularly when it came to the minister's presence for activities or events, made it difficult for ministers to steward their time and resources well.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁵ Malcolm Grundy's consideration of multi-congregation ministry reflected many of the elements I found in my fieldwork. Malcolm Grundy, *Multi-Congregation Ministry: Theology and Practice in a Changing Church*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2015), pp. 1-49.

³⁴⁶ Leslie J. Francis and Christine E. Brewster, 'Stress from Time-Related Over-Extension in Multi-Parish Benefices', *Rural Theology* 10, no. 2, (January 2012), pp. 161-78; Paul Rolph, Jenny Rolph, and John Cole, 'Living the Pressures of Rural Ministry: Two Case Studies', *Rural Theology* 7, no. 2, (January 2009), pp. 99-111.

In 2017, a church member in Braedubh proposed having a pastoral care team to share the responsibilities of visiting people. The general response from the elders and church board members was mixed, recognising that it would lessen the burden on the minister but also recounting stories of people who would feel neglected by the change. An elder might visit a church member in the hospital as part of their pastoral care duties, but unless the *minister* had visited, the church member claimed that the church did not prioritise pastoral care.³⁴⁷

Crucially, the role of the minister in a rural parish church can materially affect the witness of the church in the area. Regardless of the internal structure or polity of the church, for members of the community, the minister represents the beliefs and priorities of the church. In Riverglebe I heard stories from community members who disparaged the work of the church based on their personal history of interpersonal conflicts with the previous minister. Similarly, people in Braedubh told me about the ‘odd fish’ who had been the minister years before my fieldwork started. Stories of alienation or inaccessibility continued to define their conceptions of the parish church, gradually changing as a result of new initiatives where church people, activities and events moved into more visible roles and spaces in the village, participating in village initiatives and working alongside other church groups.

The pressure placed on ministers in rural parish churches has been shown to contribute to high levels of stress, anxiety and burnout.³⁴⁸ This contradicts the pervasive narrative of ministers choosing to move to a rural parish prior to retirement with the mistaken conception that it will be quiet or easy. A previous minister in Braedubh was reported to have described the parish as a ‘last post before retirement’, which, in my assessment, reinforced a sense of decline and decay. Among ministers nearing retirement I heard a common theme of wanting to reduce their commitments and focus on one or two aspects of parish ministry rather than continue to be the ‘one-man-band’ expected by

³⁴⁷ Cf. Grundy, *Multi-Congregation Ministry*, p. 7; Rural Affairs Group, ‘Released for Mission’, p. 21.

³⁴⁸ Christine Brewster, ‘Ways of Coping in Rural Ministry’, *Rural Theology* 10, no. 1, (26 July 2012), pp. 70–87; Mary Ann Coate, *Clergy Stress: The Hidden Conflicts in Ministry*, (London: SPCK, 1989); Paul Rolph and Jenny Rolph, ‘Perceptions of Stress on Those in Rural Ministry: Listening to Church Leaders’, in *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, ed. Leslie J. Francis and Mandy Robbins, (Bristol: Equinox, 2012), pp. 337–46; Christopher Rutledge, ‘Burnout and the Practice of Ministry among Rural Clergy: Looking for the Hidden Signs’, *Rural Theology* 4, no. 1, (January 2006), pp. 57–65.

members of the parish. As a result of this move in Braedubh, the focus of ministry reduced to the specific interests of the minister who spent significant hours preparing for Sunday services, working in the manse garden and enjoying a life of semi-retirement. During Braedubh's vacancy they relied on pulpit supply or a part-time locum who was required to spend the majority of their time preparing for Sunday services or officiating funerals and there was little time or energy for new initiatives. One part-time locum attempted to change the narrative by starting a Messy Church gathering, eventually appointing a 'lay' leader from another church congregation who lived in the local parish to continue overseeing it, but it was viewed by many as a separate initiative from the mission and ministry of the parish church.

The tendency towards dependency on ministers as the sole leader and director of the church is not only unsustainable but unhealthy. The structure and procedures around retirement and vacancy in the Church of Scotland make transitions difficult or perceived to be difficult by church members. In Braedubh I heard complaints about the lack of support and guidance when a previous minister left, compounded by their lack of succession planning. In Riverglebe, one of my final presentations included a discussion around training and succession plans for the future in the knowledge that the minister was due to retire within five years. The response was one of consternation as elders and church members looked at me in horror, unable to comprehend life without a minister, which reinforced the necessity of actively engaging in succession planning and team development to ensure a sustainable future.

5.3.2 Committee/Accompanists = Elders?

My reflections on the significance of the minister's role in rural parish churches were counter-balanced by my experiences with the elders of both churches. Within the Church of Scotland, a court of elders is, ostensibly, responsible for the spiritual and pastoral care of the congregation while the minister is an elder responsible for teaching and administering sacraments. In an ideal world the kirk session works together as a team, supporting all aspects of mission and ministry and providing continuity over decades and generations as elders are ordained for life. Ministers might come and go, but elders tend to remain unless

they specifically resign their eldership, making it possible for a church to maintain a consistent witness in a parish for decades.

In practice, I found kirk sessions were predominantly comprised of people who felt a duty towards keeping the church building open and were overburdened by practical considerations and legal or administrative regulations. Several had been recruited as elders based on their practical skills or simply because they wanted to see the church stay open and there was no one else. As I interacted with them I talked about my understanding of eldership based on my reading or experience, discovering that the publications I had read did not correspond with the lived reality of these elders.³⁴⁹ Every elder I spoke to had a particular idea about their role, some focusing on visiting people in their district while others talked about serving communion, maintaining the building, supporting a minister's 'wild ideas' or contributing to the recruitment process for a new minister. Few of them spoke about any form of training and all admitted to being uncomfortable about having 'spiritual' conversations. They were happy to follow a minister's lead and provide practical support but had little conception of what it meant to be ordained as an elder within the Church of Scotland.

5.4 Ensemble: Fellowship and Teamwork

Having discussed the challenges around leadership in Braedubh and Riverglebe, I bring my focus to the ensemble: the people.

A choir is, necessarily, an ensemble of people singing the same piece of music together at the same time and in the same key. There may be many parts, each contributing to the overall sound of the piece as different vocal lines add harmonies and different voices add character and richness. Some pieces have a solo line or verse which is supported by the chorus and accompaniment. A successful choir is one that works together, listening to each other and following direction as they sing the same piece of music.

³⁴⁹ Alexander Forsyth's Hope Trust Fellowship research on eldership in the Church of Scotland was pivotal in my reflections on eldership and the possibilities of what *could be* in terms of the future of church leadership. Alexander Forsyth, 'Introduction to the History and Theology of the Eldership within the Church of Scotland', Hope Trust Research Fellowship, (Edinburgh: New College, University of Edinburgh, December 2015).

As I spent time with the people of Braedubh and Riverglebe, I listened to their voices, identifying things they found to be important and looking for ways to walk alongside them. In doing so I learned about the diversity of people's interests and experiences. It was a long process of looking for opportunities to have conversations and build trust but I gradually discovered the extent to which the people of Braedubh and Riverglebe represented untapped resources.

In this section I consider *Fellowship* and *Teamwork*, two aspects of a choir ensemble that are relevant to churches. I focus on the importance of facilitating communication and community development, particularly as they relate to a team approach to mission and ministry. I argue that the strength of rural parish churches lies in bringing people together and mobilising them to work together in witness and service.

5.4.1 Fellowship

During my early months of fieldwork, neither church prioritised community development or fellowship among church members. While there were individuals who had strong connections with each other beyond Sunday services, there was little cohesiveness within congregations, and very little contact between members of different churches within the same linkage. This made it difficult for me to establish rapport with church members. I missed a regular time of talking with other people over tea or coffee following the service. In my previous experience the social element of connecting with other people was a prime benefit of participating in a local church,³⁵⁰ but in Braedubh and Riverglebe, people arrived moments before the service began and left as soon as the service ended. Failing to provide time for informal conversations over tea and coffee appeared counterproductive, hindering the mission and ministry of

³⁵⁰ The contribution of churches to social capital in localities has been widely attested, particularly in rural areas. Keith Ineson and Lewis Burton, 'Social Capital Generated by Two Rural Churches: The Role of Individual Believers', in *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, ed. Leslie J. Francis and Mandy Robbins, (Bristol: Equinox, 2012), pp. 216–28; Keirri McClymont, Paula Jacobs, and Ben Cavanagh, 'Social Capital in Scotland: Measuring and Understanding Scotland's Social Connections', (Edinburgh: Scottish Government, 2020), p. 67; Rachel Ormston and Susan Reid, 'Exploring Dimensions of Social Capital in Scotland: Findings from The Scottish Social Attitudes Survey and Scottish Household Survey', Social Research, (Edinburgh: ScotCen Social Research, 2012), p. 44.

the church by limiting opportunities for people to develop friendships or a sense of shared identity.

As time progressed, both churches implemented a pre-service fellowship time. In Braedubh it was a result of the external recommendation from the stewardship consultants, but in Riverglebe it was proposed by the minister as an alternative to keeping people late when they wanted to get home for their Sunday lunches. Gradually the culture in both churches changed as people began arriving early to share in a social time over tea and coffee. I began seeing people speaking with each other for five or ten minutes as they stood near the table, when they had previously exchanged generic greetings across the aisle from their respective pews. Even those who were quiet and reserved or shy would arrive and respond with a smile when greeted by a more outgoing person.

Informal conversations about life events or families occurred alongside discussions about church services or meetings. For some, it was an opportunity to air their concerns or suggest ideas for the future. I felt more comfortable speaking to people I recognised and asking questions or responding to their questions. People asked me about my research and told me stories about their experiences in the villages. In Riverglebe the minister made it a priority to arrive in time for a cup of tea and a chat with members of the congregation, often discussing practical matters as well as personal, pastoral or community issues. In Braedubh, different ministers handled the time differently, some arrived early enough to engage with the social conversation while others arrived just in time for the service to begin after staying for tea after their first morning service in the linked church.

This time of fellowship and social interaction was particularly important in Riverglebe as it gave members of different parish congregations, Riverglebe and Kingriver, an opportunity to get to know each other. The union which took place immediately before my arrival had been difficult and Kingriver members felt discouraged and 'betrayed' by Presbytery over the closing of their building. Kingriver members told me they felt like outsiders in Riverglebe. They lived in neighbouring villages and had their own church routines which had been supplanted by Riverglebe without any apparent consideration or consultation. When I first arrived, I was intrigued by the natural division between the two

congregations in their seating patterns. Kingriver members sat on one side of the aisle while the majority of Riverglebe members sat on the other or sat apart in their traditional pews. They might greet each other, but they rarely talked for long. As tea and coffee became the normal routine, Riverglebe and Kingriver members mingled before and after the service, building connections and contributing their ideas in the informal conversations about events or activities.

From my perspective, the time spent building relationships and communication between church members was a positive sign of the potential for development in these churches. As months passed I witnessed increasing awareness and openness about the challenges facing the churches and villages. I also witnessed an increased sense of community. In Riverglebe, the morning chat often included announcements about upcoming events in the village or informal decisions about church furnishings, such as gathering opinions about the style for new pew cushions. In Braedubh, there were regular conversations about personal issues and families or about local and national politics. I was able to observe interactions, listen to conversations, participate in discussions and assess the complexity of interpersonal dynamics and individual personalities within the church and village community.

5.4.2 Teamwork

As I invested time in getting to know individuals in public and private settings, I realised that each individual had a different set of interests and skills. The churches were so small that every person affected the corporate dynamic. Some people had been involved in the churches since they were children, baptised into communion 80 years earlier, while others had moved to the area a few years earlier. Each person had an opinion on the current situation in the church and questions or ideas about the future but were unsure of the proper ways to implement them.

In my experiences with Braedubh and Riverglebe I found that both churches were unfamiliar with the idea of active participation in mission and ministry. Those who were formally involved in kirk sessions and church boards had little training or development, often overwhelmed by logistics rather than released to serve. There were few opportunities for discussions about succession planning

or team building. Congregation members found it difficult to communicate their ideas or find opportunities to actively contribute to the overall direction of the church.

In Braedubh I hosted an evening of dreaming about possibilities for the future to explore some of the ideas among church members. One member suggested the idea of chaplaincy training and developing a pastoral care team during the vacancy. Unfortunately, while their contribution to the discussion was welcomed, along with several other suggestions, it was not adopted or implemented as there was a lack of clarity about the processes for developing such an initiative. As another member commented after the evening, 'it's always good to talk about ideas, but we've done this before and things never happen.' People were willing and able to contribute but were unsupported or unsure how to begin.

In Riverglebe, I found people who were happy to support the practical aspects of Sunday services, welcoming people or preparing tea and coffee, but unused to contributing their own ideas to other aspects of church life. I witnessed a slow change as people began adapting to the different oversight and leadership style of the new minister. When an individual proposed some new community initiatives and approached the minister about using the church building they were given full permission to implement their ideas. The minister actively supported their ideas by attending events, but declined a prominent role, feeling it was important to allow things to develop independently. Although I was encouraged by the new developments I watched the individual struggle to maintain momentum without the support of a team of people. They eventually chose to limit their focus to those initiatives that had support from a team of villagers.

As I considered the limitations of multi-parish ministry I was disappointed and frustrated by the lack of team development and training I witnessed in both churches. While there was a strong team in the linked parish of Oxfield, Eastfield and Greyfield, Braedubh felt neglected and purposeless, so overwhelmed by circumstance and trying to maintain the regular forms and routines that they were unable to consider taking action for their future.

Riverglebe had a team of people who were happy to contribute to the regular tasks of the church but limited their involvement with new initiatives.

In some cases, this was a direct result of their experience and the pattern established by previous ministers. As discussed above, I found a tension within both church congregations between their expectations of a minister and their desire to be actively involved in church ministry initiatives. These expectations were often implied rather than stated, as on one occasion in Riverglebe when the minister discovered there was no Remembrance wreath for the memorial service because the previous minister 'always ordered it'. This expectation had never been communicated to the minister, nor had the minister confirmed the normal routine with the kirk session because [*their*] previous experience had been that a member of the session ordered the wreath.

The problem of poorly communicated expectations or assumptions was one that I witnessed repeatedly during my fieldwork. The inherited model of mission and ministry relied on the approval and support of a minister but floundered in the absence of clear direction despite willing people. Instead, countless hours were spent discussing possibilities rather than making plans and taking action. On one memorable occasion I sat in a congregational board meeting where members of the board and elders talked about the need for a new sign, agreeing that it was important and should be discussed. As it had been six months since the stewardship conference where it was recommended, I offered to make a temporary sandwich board style sign using pieces of wood and paint I had found in the manse garage. My offer was greeted with surprise before being accepted. The following week I took the sign to the church and it became part of the weekly setup on Sunday mornings, continuing to remain in use after my departure from Braedubh. It took time, initiative and creativity, but I was happy to do it. I had responded to the need using the available materials and made something useful out of scraps.

I reflected on the parallels between my experience of making a sign and the possibilities for the local churches. Both Braedubh and Riverglebe had a tendency to focus on what they were lacking rather than considering the people and resources who *were* part of their churches. As I thought about the possibilities for long-term sustainability in both churches I was reminded of the

need for prioritising local team development. My reading and involvement with the International Rural Churches Association introduced me to discussions around Local Shared Ministry, where rural churches focused on equipping local people to serve their local parishes. The Local Ministry movement spread through the Anglican communion in the 1980s and 1990s, partly in response to declining numbers of clergy and smaller churches, recognising a need for a new way of engaging in Christian mission and ministry.³⁵¹ The fundamental core of the approach depends on ‘discovering who we are as the people of God, with gifts to be made available for what God is up to.’³⁵² Ironically, the Church of Scotland’s structure of eldership and ordination prevented the wide scale adoption of a similar approach to collaborative local ministry on the grounds that elders already filled that role. In my assessment, the future for mission and ministry in Scotland requires intentionally investing in teamwork and developing collaborative approaches to training and ministry that involve people who are present and active in local churches. The situation in Braedubh and Riverglebe illustrated challenges which are exacerbated by the crisis in clergy provision in the Church of Scotland.

5.5 Practice: Preparation and Priorities

Choir practices function as an opportunity to learn music and develop as a group. Over a period of weeks or months, the director, accompanist, and choir work together to prepare pieces for concert performances, gradually growing in confidence and adapting to create a united and cohesive sound. Practices are an opportunity to prioritise problem areas, repeating musical phrases or vocal lines to smooth out difficulties in the overall song.

In my reflections I began to think of Sunday services as choir practices. In the absence of any form of regular Bible studies or prayer meetings, Sunday services

³⁵¹ A good overview of Local Ministry is found in the stories collected by Robin Greenwood and Caroline Pascoe. Robin Greenwood and Caroline Pascoe, *Local Ministry: Story, Process and Meaning*, (London: SPCK, 2006). Geoffrey Haworth traces the origins of Local Shared Ministry in Aotearoa, New Zealand in his 2009 study leave report. Geoffrey Haworth, ‘The Triumph of Maintenance over Mission? Or Local Mission at the Flaxroots? Change and Development in Local Shared Ministry in Tikanga Pakeha, in the Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia’, Study Leave Report, (Christchurch: Diocese of Christchurch, 2009), p. 5-11.

³⁵² Ken Booth and Jenny Dawson, ‘Practising the World’s Future: Congregational Development in Christchurch, New Zealand’, in *Local Ministry: Story, Process and Meaning*, ed. Robin Greenwood and Caroline Pascoe, (London: SPCK, 2006), pp. 65–73, at p. 66.

were the primary opportunities for teaching and discipling church members to equip them to act as witnesses in their daily lives. However, as I participated in services, taking notes and asking people about their perceptions of the purpose of Sunday mornings I discovered that people considered Sundays to be part of their routine, offering a time to reflect apart from the pressures of life. As one individual commented,

I come to church to have a bit of a sing, chat with people and listen to the minister.... It makes me feel good, you know, listening to positive thoughts.... No, I don't think about it much during the week. Why would I?

For many church members, Sunday services represented the primary, and sometimes only, expression of church mission and ministry in the village. As I reflected on the form, content and focus of regular services I was conscious that they were designed for church members, the people who *belonged*, with little guidance for newcomers. Participating in the services, and Sunday morning routines, gave me a perspective on the priorities of both churches. In both churches I found an air of 'aye been', a local phrase meaning that things had always been the same and could be expected to stay the same.³⁵³

5.5.1 Expected Forms/Routines

Every choir practice has a clearly defined form. People arrive and take their seats, pulling out their music and getting ready. Some choirs post a running order for the rehearsal so people can arrange their music. Most practices begin with warm-up vocal exercises led by the director or a member of the committee before going through pieces one at a time. At the end of the practice, everyone helps with putting chairs away before leaving for home.

In my experience, Sunday services in Braedubh and Riverglebe followed a predictable form. A minister prepared and delivered every aspect of worship, apart from some readings and the occasional prayer. Elders handled the practical elements of putting the heating on and handing out hymnbooks or ringing the bell at the beginning of the service. Church members themselves

³⁵³ See 7.5 for further discussion of 'aye been' and its implications for local churches.

entered, took a pew and then stood or sat according to the structure of the service. At Braedubh there was a rota for people to read while Riverglebe struggled with finding volunteers unless the minister specifically asked someone to read.

Both churches followed similar patterns for Sunday worship, although different ministers had their own approaches. Each service began with a welcome and intimations or notices about upcoming events. The minister read a call to worship, usually part of a psalm, and announced the first hymn, indicating that the congregation should stand. At the end of the hymn we sat for a prayer of approach and confession, commonly followed by the Lord's Prayer repeated in unison by church members. In Riverglebe the minister regularly followed the prayer with a short talk about a memorable illustration, ostensibly designed for children although there were no children who attended services. It was always well received by church members, who often remembered it better than the sermon. After the prayers in Braedubh, and the talk in Riverglebe, we stood for another hymn which was followed by the Bible readings. It was common for both churches to include three readings, one from the Old Testament, one from a gospel and one from another New Testament book. Some ministers followed the *Revised Common Lectionary*³⁵⁴ while others prepared services according to their own interests or a biblical book.

Another hymn followed the readings and usually introduced the offering. After the collection, the minister would present prayers of thanksgiving and prayers of intercession for local people and national or international concerns. There was usually another hymn before the sermon during which the minister would move to the pulpit or the lectern. As we sat down the minister would begin. Following the sermon we would sing another hymn before the closing prayer and benediction. Services ended as we stood together and sang a threefold chorus of 'Amen'.

Services across the presbytery averaged around an hour in length with average sermon times of 15-25 minutes. Services were usually around 55 minutes long in Riverglebe but varied in Braedubh depending on which minister was leading.

³⁵⁴ *Revised Common Lectionary*, Consultation on Common Texts (Abingdon, 1992)

One visiting minister wrapped up the service in 43 minutes, leaving church members somewhat bemused and commenting that the minister must have been in a rush to get home. Another minister regularly took 75-80 minutes, preaching for 35-45 minutes while people tapped their feet, visibly checked the time on their watches or phones, or muttered under their breath about hurrying up. People who had lunch plans or wanted to get home for the football complained when services ran long, rushing out the door as soon as the service ended.

5.5.2 Identifying Problem Areas

In typical choir practices there is a clear purpose. They are opportunities to work on learning pieces of music and gradually refining them until they are ready for performance. When a piece is first introduced, the choir sings through it, identifying problem areas and places that need extra work. Sometimes it is a straightforward piece that just needs a little refining, but other times the piece needs to be worked through line by line. Some pieces are not a good fit for a particular choir, presenting more of a challenge as the choir struggles to work with it.

There were challenges in both churches over Sunday services. As a singer I found the hymns difficult. I love to sing, but many of the hymns chosen by ministers were unfamiliar or had difficult tunes. Braedubh did not have a regular organist in the congregation, relying on organists who also played for other services and regularly rushed in at the last moment. At times there was no organist and we relied on a minister attempting to lead acapella, which was not always successful. The scattered church members rarely sang out, often quietly humming along or trying to find a tune and follow the tiny print in the hymnbook. Riverglebe had a regular organist who tried to support the singing, but many congregation members were still uncomfortable and sang quietly into their books as if they were afraid of being heard.

Church members were aware of the problems with sung worship and bemoaned the poor impression such singing might give to visitors. In Riverglebe one church member who attended the community choir expressed a desire to invite choir members to church so they could boost the singing but was afraid 'they might be put off by how dire it is!' I knew how much of a difference I made when I

arrived in Riverglebe one Sunday to be greeted with an announcement, ‘The singing will be good today!’ When I sang out, people had the confidence to sing too, secure in the knowledge that someone knew the tune. A clear sense of direction and support made it easier for people to participate.

A lack of confidence contributed to other problems for Sunday services. Ministers who tried to encourage participation in readings or prayers were regularly faced with people who did not feel comfortable standing at the front or speaking up. The minister in Braedubh was asked to write prayers for members to read, creating more work rather than lessening the burden of preparation for Sunday services. This seemed strange to me as members of the Guild³⁵⁵ in Braedubh would put together a service for one Sunday in the year, usually comprised of hymns, readings and updates about the work of the Guild, demonstrating their capacity for contributing more actively to the regular practices of worship. Even within regular Guild meetings, members would lead times of worship, with hymns, readings and prayer. When I asked why they were unwilling to participate in leading Sunday worship members told me they felt more pressure in ‘normal’ services.

5.5.3 Discipleship/Equipping

The primary goal for any choir is preparing for a performance. Once a piece has been introduced to the choir it takes time and effort to get it ready for performance. Choir members are expected to bring pencils and make notes on their music to remind them of points that have been worked on or highlight areas for private practice. Choir members have a responsibility to work on their parts in their own time between practices. It may be alone or in a small group with other members, but it is an ongoing process of refinement. Practices go smoothly when everyone is prepared and ready to contribute their part.

³⁵⁵ The Church of Scotland Guild is a voluntary organisation that was originally begun as a way of acknowledging and championing the work of women in local communities and international missions. It became a place for women to serve in their churches and society at large. In 1997, membership was opened to men and the Guild continues to support local, national and international projects through fundraising, awareness and service. Cf. Church of Scotland, ‘Church of Scotland Guild’, accessed 8 November 2021, <https://churchofscotland.org.uk/serve/the-guild/about-us>.

As I reflected on Sunday services I thought about their purpose. Were they an opportunity for the minister to air their opinions with little interaction or relation to the local church and people? Were they designed for passive observation on the part of attendees? Was attendance considered to be merely a way of marking the passing weeks? Or a nice ‘feel good’ component and opportunity for social interaction? Or were they opportunities for encouraging faith development and inspiring people to share their faith with others?

I wondered how the *normative* theology from services translated to *operant* theology. Sermon content varied widely from cerebral discussions of the possible geological or environmental factors explaining the ten plagues of Exodus,³⁵⁶ to simple retellings of Esther or Ruth, reflections on lobsters in Jordan Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life*,³⁵⁷ and more traditional expositional sermons on a particular passage or verse, accompanied by a relevant illustration. Some stimulated discussions after services, but more were simply agreed to be ‘a good moral message’ or ‘thought for the day’ and represented a part of the service with little practical purpose. I saw little evidence of faith development and few opportunities for considering how theology might impact life.

In my experience, regular Sunday services in Braedubh and Riverglebe were largely inward-facing and insular, addressing the same handful of people from week to week and month to month. Yet, for many in both churches, Sunday services were their primary focus in thinking about the role of ‘church’ and ‘faith’ or ‘ministry’. Sermons which challenged people to speak to their neighbours or think of themselves as lawn daisies spreading the gospel about the Kingdom of God were well received, but rarely put into practice. ‘Ministry’ was something the minister did on Sunday mornings or through the week in pastoral visiting. People responded to my questions about mission and ministry or reflections on the responsibility of Christians to witness in their local area by commenting, ‘It’s alright for you, you’ve been trained in this!’

³⁵⁶ Scholarly discussion generally revolves around the Minoan eruption of Santorini. See Barbara J. Sivertsen, *The Parting of the Sea How Volcanoes, Earthquakes, and Plagues Shaped the Story of Exodus*, (Princeton; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 37–42.

³⁵⁷ Jordan B. Peterson, Norman Doidge, and Ethan Van Sciver, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018), pp. 1–22.

I wondered if it would be possible to change the narrative of Sunday services so they might become times of training and equipping. In the absence of Bible studies or discipleship groups, Sunday services could be a safe place for questions, especially in small churches like Braedubh and Riverglebe. At the same time, the regular form and structure of Sunday services represented continuity and security in the midst of an ever-changing culture. To my mind, the question for rural churches such as Braedubh and Riverglebe involved reflecting on their priorities and purpose in preparing to engage with their local contexts.

Would the *choir* of the church membership be prepared to perform in front of an audience? Would church members be willing to take responsibility for mission and ministry?

5.6 Performance: Public Engagement

For any choir, the practices have an end goal in mind: the performance. It is the opportunity to demonstrate the hard work that has gone into learning pieces and arrangements. The performance involves a type of dialogue between choir and audience in a shared moment. Each concert is different because each audience is different. There are also internal changes for each concert ranging from song choices to which choir members are involved. Performances are publicised and people invited but it is impossible to know how a concert will go until it happens. The same applies for churches and church members as they engage with the community.

I have intentionally chosen to use the metaphor of *performance* for this section, highlighting public-facing events and services, by which I mean those which were specifically intended to include people from the local village or area. If, as I have argued, regular Sunday services are primarily focused on preparing and equipping regular attenders and church members in their Christian faith, then special services or events should be seen as public witness opportunities. These included seasonal services (Christmas, New Year, Easter, Harvest and Remembrance Day), weddings, baptisms, funerals, school services and community events. I was also interested to see how church members participated in the community apart from 'church-focused' events. In this

section I present a selection of examples of public engagement, arguing that there is *potential* for developing creative missional responses to opportunities in these rural parishes.

5.6.1 Seasonal Services

Traditional church services marked the passing seasons in Braedubh and Riverglebe, both in terms of calendar years and life events such as weddings, baptisms, or funerals. In each case I witnessed the church relating to the village in a different way than might be expected in regular Sunday services. Christmas, New Year, Easter, Harvest and Remembrance Day services regularly welcomed visiting family members or villagers who appreciated the rhythms of tradition and ritual that accompanied these events. Such people may be described as ‘nominal’ church members but should not be dismissed in considering the sustainability of rural churches.³⁵⁸ As I spoke to visitors and family members I discovered a common sense of belonging.³⁵⁹ Many equated services with taking time to reflect in the busyness of life, being reminded of a larger narrative and having a change of focus. Villagers who never attended Sunday services described themselves as ‘Church of Scotland’ when talking about religion or beliefs, expressing a desire for a church funeral. One of my neighbours denied any interest in ‘church things’ but asked about a Christmas Eve Watchnight service, commenting that it was the one service they missed when they stopped attending church after the tragic death of a young relative.

Despite appearances of rising secularisation in Scotland, rural churches are still visibly active in their local community in response to a surviving social narrative about the role of the church in marking passing seasons. As Doug Gay observes, the narrative of secularisation is more complicated than it first appears.³⁶⁰ Martyn Percy argues that churches, by which he means the collective church membership, are, paradoxically, more likely to believe the narrative of persistent secularisation and the decrease of public faith than any other

³⁵⁸ Cf. Woodhead, “Nominals”.

³⁵⁹ Cf. Walker, *God’s Belongers*, pp.47-56.

³⁶⁰ Gay, *Reforming the Kirk*, pp. 11–27.

group.³⁶¹ Although membership and regular attendance might be declining, churches like Braedubh and Riverglebe maintain a public witness through seasonal services.

Of the services marking calendar events I was particularly interested in what I witnessed at Remembrance Day and Easter. The following extended accounts of each illustrate the key elements which stimulated my reflections on their significance for the future of Braedubh and Riverglebe. The first recounts my experience of Remembrance Sunday 2018 with Riverglebe and the importance of leaving the building and going to meet the village. The second reflects on my experiences of ecumenical services in Braedubh during the Easter period.

5.6.1.1 Remembrance Day

During my fieldwork I found Remembrance Sunday was one of the most important days in the church year, involving members of the village and community groups in laying wreaths, reading prayers or reflections and joining in a time of silence. Most villages in the area had at least one war memorial and each village expected a ceremony to be held in *their* village at *their* memorial. On Remembrance Sunday 2018 this expectation was increased exponentially as it corresponded with the 11th of November and marked the Centenary of the Armistice. For ministers in linked parish churches such as Braedubh and Riverglebe, this presented a problem. It was physically impossible to be at every memorial at 11am on Remembrance Sunday.

As a researcher I tried to attend as many Remembrance Day events as I could through the day to get a sense of the level of expectation and commitment across both of my case study churches and their respective linkages. I attended and participated in three church services, one wreath-laying memorial, visited an exhibition and had numerous conversations with church and village members. I drove over forty miles between different events and was away from my house from 9:15am until after 5pm. I ate half a sandwich in the car between events and gratefully accepted a cup of tea and a ginger biscuit following the last

³⁶¹ Martyn Percy, 'Many Rooms in My Father's House: The Changing Identity of the English Parish Church', in *The Future of the Parish System: Shaping the Church of England for the 21st Century*, ed. Steven J. L. Croft, (London: Church House, 2006), pp. 3–15, at p. 5.

afternoon event. By the time I made it home I was physically, mentally and emotionally drained.

The second stop of my day was in Riverglebe where I arrived in the village just before 11am. As I parked my car and briskly crossed the road to hurry to the gate and walk up to the church, I noticed a gathering of people from the village near the war memorial at the corner. Knowing the wreath-laying ceremony usually followed the service I felt torn between going to speak to some familiar people or continuing up the path to the church. One of the former elders arrived at the gate at the same moment and we walked up to the church discussing the situation.

“What should we do?”
“We always have the service in the church before going across to the memorial.”
“How did this happen?”
“Maybe they didn’t realise what time it would be.”
“Was it on the village events list?”

As we entered the church, we checked the notice board and saw that the service and wreath laying was listed, but there was no clarification about the timing for people who might not attend church regularly. This was a problem for anyone planning to join in as they would naturally think the wreath laying should happen at or around 11am.

There was a buzz of conversation in the church about what should be done to keep in touch with the villagers. Should we stay in the church and keep on with the ‘normal’ way of things? Or should we go down to the memorial and meet with the village members who had come along? The problem was complicated by the knowledge that the associate minister who would be taking the service was coming from another service and, based on the previous year, would be late arriving. While we were talking another of the elders arrived and the duty elders had a quick conference about what should be done.

Within minutes we were headed down the path to join the villagers gathered at the memorial. One of the elders set off at a run to get the bugler, who had been told the ceremony would happen at 12:15pm and another kept a sharp eye out for the minister arriving. We had no orders of service to hand out and

people were confused by the situation. All they knew was that they were waiting and it was well after 11am. As I watched the meeting between church and village I was intrigued by a clear physical distinction between churchgoers and villagers as people stood with their friends or family. I knew people in both groups and felt it was important to ‘bridge the gap’ so I left the clutch of people who had walked down the path together in order to speak with those who had made an effort to come out on a cold Sunday morning. I was curious about their perspectives and opinions.

“Why doesn’t one of the elders just put down the wreath?”
“You’d think there would have been a ceremony at 11am on this Remembrance Day!”
“Why isn’t the minister here already? [Are they] always this late?”
“This wouldn’t have happened with the old minister.”

“Nice to see lots of people out.”
“It’s too cold to be standing out here for long.”
“Well, you could always come into the church after for a cup of tea or coffee after the wreath and join in the service.”
“Is it actually warmer in there?”
“It’s usually warm for the choir practice.”

“Here comes the bugler.”
“Oh, we’re actually getting a bugler?”

“Look, there’s a car, is that the minister?”
“Where’s [the minister] going now? We’re here!”

I asked after various people and we talked about village matters. When they complained about the minister’s lack of punctuality, I explained about the complications of several services that morning and the minister would be coming from a neighbouring village.

At 11:17am the minister arrived and looked at the group gathered at the memorial in some dismay. [They] found a place to park and an elder explained the situation. The minister handed over a stack of folded orders of service and then shot up the drive and out of sight. The elder came across and began

handing them out to the gathered people. Several people shared as there were not enough for each of the 46 of us to have our own copy.

As we looked at the order of service the minister arrived in a rush with flying black robes ‘like Harry Potter’, to quote one child. While the minister was checking on the wreath and chatting briefly with the bugler one of the choir members turned to me and said, ‘Look at this! It’s too bad the choir wasn’t asked to be involved. We could have sung it as a choir piece.’ I was surprised at this change from their previously expressed suspicion about the church’s involvement in village events and regular comments that it was a good thing the choir was separate from ‘church stuff’.

The minister directed us to look to the last two pages, where we would find the service of remembrance. [They] proceeded through the service clearly and well, with a respect and honour that affected several people. As [they] read the names I saw some people touch their eyes as though they were wiping a tear away. The wreath was laid with due ceremony by the church member who has carried out that duty for time immemorial, in his full kilt, medals and Glengarry bonnet.³⁶² We observed the time of silence, broken only by the sound of car engines idling where the traffic had been stopped by elders standing in the road to halt the traffic.

The minister finished with an invitation to the regular service and conversations started up again.

“That was very good. [They] did an excellent job.”

“I’m so cold.”

“Are you coming up?”

“No, no, that’s quite enough church for me this year.”

“Did you hear those cars? How rude!”

“Will we see you at choir practice on Tuesday?”

³⁶² A traditional Scottish hat.

“Next year we’ll get the timings sorted out.”

I walked up with one of the local families, whom I had never seen at a Sunday service, and we talked about village matters. I wondered if they would have attended the service if we had not started at the memorial. As we entered the church I watched the regular attenders move towards their predictable pews. The villagers sat apart, in the pews where families arrange themselves for school services. I chose to sit with them, feeling that it was an opportunity to strengthen links between the church and village. After the service I spoke with several who remarked on the poignancy of the service, indicating their interest in attending again the following year. Although the circumstances were less than ideal, their perception of the church’s willingness to adapt and move to meet with the people made a positive impression that offset the problems with communication and expectations about timing.

5.6.1.2 Easter

Alongside Remembrance Day and Christmas, Easter morning services were very popular. Easter Sunday regularly saw 35 to 42 people in Riverglebe and between 32 and 38 in Braedubh. In Braedubh, there were joint ecumenical services on Maundy Thursday (in the parish church), Good Friday (at Northfield Evangelical) and at 8am on Easter Sunday morning (in the carpark at the top of the hill). The 8am outdoor service finished with bacon rolls for breakfast in the community café before the members of the parish church and Northfield went to their own regular services.

My first Maundy Thursday in Braedubh was a special experience. The arrival of 19 people from Northfield church changed the atmosphere and seating arrangements within the church. They sat together towards the front half of the church and this encouraged Braedubh members to sit together in the nearby pews. One couple stayed in their normal pew at the back, but many other members arranged themselves in the pews immediately behind the Northfield congregation or sat with them. Many knew each other well through community events and spent time talking prior to the beginning of the service.

Despite having more than double the regular number of people in church, my impression of the service was one of intimacy. The service was conducted with candles flickering and casting shadows on the walls. There was minimal electric lighting and I felt a sense of calm as we, the joint congregation, quietened at the beginning of the service. The minister began with an explanation of the Tenebrae service and structure, describing the history and traditions of meditation on Christ's suffering.³⁶³ I appreciated the explanation and printed order of service as they provided context and direction for the service. This was important for all the attendees as a Tenebrae service was unfamiliar to both the Presbyterian parish church members and the evangelical Northfield members.

We, as the congregation, sat together nearer the front while the serving minister stood on the floor in front of the platform in leading the service and reflections. The service followed a traditional format of alternating hymns with readings and prayers. Representatives from both churches participated in reading the Bible and leading communal prayers. The hymns were chosen by the minister, in discussion with leaders from Northfield church. The hymns were familiar to everyone in the building and sung with enthusiasm. Many of the church members from Northfield had good voices and sang out with confidence. I heard Braedubh members joining in without hesitation, which was unusual in my experience of regular services, causing me to catch my breath as I felt my spirit soar listening to the church echoing with the sound of worship.

The sacrament of communion was particularly striking. There was little formal ceremony in its presentation. Rather, when the time came to observe communion, there was an atmosphere of quiet contemplation. The moderator stood in the aisle between the pews holding the loaf of bread which [they] introduced and broke into two halves. [They] approached the first pew to [their] right and passed the loaf to the first individual with the words, 'This is

³⁶³ Historically the Tenebrae service, literally meaning "darkness" or "shadows", was held over three days, but in recent times is usually observed on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday. It is a service for contemplation on Christ's suffering, symbolised by extinguishing candles and reducing or turning off the electric lighting over the course of the evening. There is a pattern of hymns, readings and prayers, often involving communion in commemoration of the Last Supper when observed on Maundy Thursday. The service ends in silence and participants leave when they feel ready, refraining from conversation until they have left the building. Harry Boonstra, 'Tenebrae | Reformed Worship', *Reformed Worship*, accessed 10 March 2020, <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/december-1986/tenebrae>.

Christ's body, broken for you.' Each person tore a piece from the loaf, eating it before serving the next person in the row with the same words. The bread was passed from person to person before returning to the moderator. Then the moderator took the chalice and a white cloth, introducing the cup and, again, serving the first person to [their] right. Once again, the cup was passed from person to person with the words, 'this is Christ's blood, shed for you.' In the quiet stillness of the church I sat and waited, reflecting on the beauty of sharing together from a common loaf and a common cup. As a symbol of unity between Christians in the local area it was strongly emotive and brought tears to my eyes as I watched the loaf and cup circulate between people who worshiped in different church buildings and traditions yet were united in the act of remembrance.

Once the elements had finished circulating the minister encouraged everyone to mingle and share the Peace with each other.

"Peace be with you."

"And also with you."

As I watched I noticed a range of responses. Some were eager and left their seats to move around the church. Others were comfortable in their pew and focused on the people they could greet without moving. Although a few looked uncomfortable, avoiding eye contact and keeping their handshakes brief, most responded with a smile. It was not an exuberant time for fellowship, but rather a time where people spoke in quiet voices, acknowledging the sense of sacredness about the moment. I found myself overwhelmed by the beauty of the moment, caught up in the knowledge that we were able to share together as one body and one church in the act of remembering Christ's body and blood. We had been well led, with clear explanations, by a moderator who facilitated an atmosphere of unity by emphasising the common foundations of Christian faith and practice.

After communion I felt as though I had entered a holy place. I was overwhelmed by emotion as I considered the importance of marking the Last Supper within an ecumenical gathering. The readings, Mark 14:26-31 and Mark 14:32-46, brought

tears to my eyes as both readers used their voices to give the words drama and emotion. The minister's brief reflection on the cost of love, obedience and devotion between the readings touched my heart and I noticed others pulling tissues or handkerchiefs from pockets and handbags as they dabbed their eyes. The service ended with a communal prayer. The minister extinguished the candles in silence and people quietly left when they felt it was time.

We say together...

*Lord Jesus,
on this evening when we remember how
all your disciples protested their undying loyalty to you -
and meant it -
until the soldiers came,
We ask you to keep us close to you at all times
not because our faith is strong,
but because it is weak;
not because we love you beyond all else,
but because we want to love you more;
not because our loyalty is unquestioning,
but because we are fearful that we will fail you.*

*Lord Jesus be with us now
to bless us, to forgive us, and to make us whole.
We ask this for your love's sake. Amen.*

*God over us,
Christ within us,
Spirit around us,
hear our prayers
and send us out now into the world
to live as followers of our crucified Lord.*

*And may the blessing of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with us always. Amen.³⁶⁴*

As I reflected on the Maundy Thursday service I was reminded that the question of mission and ministry in Braedubh was one that transcended the limitations of the parish church. Bridging gaps and sharing communion with members of Northfield illustrated the possibility of reconciliation in the wider Christian community and with the village. The experience of communion with Northfield

³⁶⁴ 'Going and Coming': A Service for the Thursday of Holy Week, 13 April 2017.

and easily sharing the elements with one another stood in stark contrast with my previous experiences of communion in Braedubh where people sat scattered through the building. Elders stood at the end of rows, reaching to hand the plate to the nearest person who would, in turn, stand and move or stretch across the gap to the next person before handing the plate back to the elder. We were in the same building, but we felt less united as a parish church than we did meeting together with Northfield Evangelical.

5.6.2 Messy Church

The Messy Church group was one of the most obvious ways Braedubh parish church tried to 'bridge the gap' between church and village. It began as an initiative to encourage faith development among young families. When I arrived in 2016 it was being led by a local individual with a team of parents who assisted with the practical details of the bi-monthly services. Although ostensibly an extension of the parish church, I quickly discovered there were clear distinctions and divisions between the Messy Church families and the regular churchgoers. There were differences in socio-economic status, culture and ideology; as well as perceptions of the purpose and function of Messy Church.

One of the primary challenges for Braedubh parish church was integrating the Messy Church families with the regular Sunday attenders. Individual church members had invested time in contributing to the Messy Church group, but there was a perception among Messy Church families of 'otherness' about regular Sunday services and the people who attended. Attempts to integrate groups through joint Christingle services or baptism services were met with apathy.

Messy Church families were asked to arrive at 3pm to assemble Christingles but church members were told the service would start at 3:45, followed by a fellowship meal. D— and M— arrived just before the service was due to start and quickly walked past the mess and chaos of the Christingle assembly line with a few quick glances and took their normal seats in the back pews....

Other church members arrived and passed the group to take their seats. The minister, who had been helping with Christingles, encouraged everyone to enter the church and all the Messy Church families went straight to the front pews and

filled them. Church members like B— and O— went to sit in their normal pews instead of sitting with the families....

I kept an eye on the service but worked with one of the visiting grandmothers to tidy up the hall and set out the tables, chairs, plates and food. I wondered how many of the church members would stay after the service. It was completely dark outside when the service started, so I expected several to go straight home.

The first afternoon Christingle service replaced the morning service, which resulted in some raised eyebrows and grumbles when it was suggested. The serving minister actively encouraged participation, inviting the entire membership to join in with the celebration. I was looking forward to the event, partly because I had already had the opportunity to meet families and develop some familiarity with them. But I was also aware of my desire to see Braedubh church working together as a united parish church rather than two separate entities: Sunday congregation and Messy Church. Although I was not directly involved in leading, I felt disappointment and frustration at the perceived barriers between ‘church’ people and Messy Church families, a sentiment echoed by the leader and several members.

As I spent more time with people in Braedubh I discovered very few people understood the underlying ethos behind Messy Church as an initiative. It had been adopted as a way of connecting with young families in the village and the activities or presentations were primarily geared towards children and young people rather than all ages. Joint events were difficult because there were problems with communication and preparing for intergenerational activities. Church members were unused to having children in the building for services and felt uncomfortable with the level of noise and disorder that they perceived as chaos. The shared meals and activities were good times to share life together and have meaningful conversations, but people gravitated towards their friends, unconsciously excluding outsiders. As a result, the church members who actively participated in Messy Church gatherings viewed themselves as interlopers rather than members of the group because they were older and did not have young children, while church members who did not attend Messy Church struggled to understand the purpose of the group and its events. Those who did attend were more likely to serve meals or help with set up and cleaning than to interact with

families, often standing or sitting on the fringes rather than building connections with Messy Church families.

Although there was a sense of division within both groups, I was interested to see that villagers who were unconnected with either did not see a difference. For many, public events, such as the Messy Church ‘Garden of Remembrance’,³⁶⁵ were opportunities where they saw ‘the church’ busy in the community. The garden was in a corner of the churchyard, against the wall. During the spring and summer Messy Church afternoons were often held in the sunshine where families and older church members worked together to paint decorative stones, plant flowers and paint pictures on stepping-stones.

On my morning visits to the community café I answered questions from local people who asked me about ‘that gathering in the churchyard’. People passing by were invited to join in, but often stood on the fringes, having conversations with parents, church members and the minister. A couple who regularly walked their dogs through the churchyard talked about their appreciation for the work and the bench that invited people to rest and admire the beauty of the garden. While they described themselves as ‘too old for that sort of thing’, I noticed they were willing to stop and chat with children and families when we were in the garden on an afternoon. The villagers saw Messy Church families and church members working together in the church grounds and assumed it was a parish church event. The internal difficulties and tensions between groups were irrelevant to outsiders.

5.6.3 School Services

Another visible connection between the church and the village happened with end-of-term school services. Neither school had a big enough hall to hold the entire population of the school and their families, so they used the churches. In Braedubh this included working closely with the parish church, Northfield Evangelical and the Christian Youth Trust that ran the Scripture Union group. In Riverglebe the services were usually planned independently by the teachers and

³⁶⁵ An initiative that began in the second year of my fieldwork.

students, although the minister was invited to share a welcome and short reflection.

In Braedubh the Christian Youth Trust, Scripture Union, Northfield and the parish church all had a regular presence in the school, providing Christian input for the religious observance component of the Scottish curriculum. As a result, the schoolchildren were engaging in conversations about the Christian faith and their end-of-term services included hymns or Christian choruses, Bible readings, prayers and clear Christian teaching. Their end-of-term services regularly included representation from both churches, supported by the Youth Trust. While I was impressed by evidence of ecumenical cooperation at my first end-of-term service for Braedubh, in December 2016, I was disappointed that the parish church, represented by the interim moderator, had a largely passive role in the service, merely providing the welcome and closing prayer, in comparison with the minister of Northfield who acted as compere for the event as well as providing a lengthy family sermon. As I reflected, I realised that I felt as though the parish church were being treated as a convenient meeting place rather than a living and active church. Northfield and the Christian Youth Trust both had a reputation for action and a younger demographic; therefore, they were responsible for Christian witness among families in the village. The parish church, on the other hand, was an old empty building, which showed little visible evidence of life, despite the Messy Church initiative.

In Riverglebe, although the minister assisted with religious education and I helped with the Scripture Union lunch club, the end of term services reflected the interests of teachers and children rather than demonstrably Christian values. It was an opportunity for teachers to present awards, children to present their work and parents to beam at their son or daughter reciting a poem or participating in performing a sketch or song. While services were held in the church building and the minister was invited to share a short reflection, it was more like a school assembly than a 'service'. The Easter end-of-term service in 2018 referenced the Easter story as one short aspect of a longer presentation on eggs throughout history and the closing song only referenced Easter as a reason to eat chocolate:

"Oh, I've got lots of chocolate,

*Give me lovely chocolate.
It's the best thing to eat, for sure.
When I get eggs for Easter
It's my favourite treat,
So I can always make some room for some more.*³⁶⁶

Despite the differences between school services in Braedubh and Riverglebe I was impressed by the extent to which the church remained part of the ebb and flow of village life. The simple fact of the building being the largest public space in the village meant school children and their families had regular contact with the church. There were no suitable alternatives. In my assessment, this demonstrated the importance of keeping church buildings open and maintaining intentional involvement with schools. Limiting my focus to Sunday morning services would have also limited my perspective on the extent of the informal connections between church and village.

5.6.4 Community Cafés and Village Events

Although my initial research question had focused on identifying opportunities for revitalisation in rural parish churches, my experiences *within* the churches had highlighted their limitations. I needed to know what was happening beyond Sunday services. Making connections with the villages offered a different perspective on the possibilities for mission and ministry. As I discovered, the church members of Braedubh and Riverglebe had rich and diverse personal networks in their villages and surrounding areas.

In Braedubh I found it difficult to identify a core group or common foundation for community. Instead I saw a multiplicity of divided groups, many of which appeared to be in competition rather than cooperation with each other. Despite spending time building relationships with regulars in the community café and making links with the local community association, I was unable to integrate into many of the groups and societies. I was a single woman with no children, therefore had limited contact with the school and young families or the Parent/Teacher Association. I was in my early thirties but free during the day when my peers were away working, so many of my contacts were the retirees

³⁶⁶ [Riverglebe] Primary School, End of Term Easter Service, Thursday 29th March 2018.

who regularly frequented the community café. The few people I met around my age were married or in long-term partnerships, often with children. Most were busy working during the day, spending time with their families in the evenings and planning trips or activities for weekends. Although I was welcomed as one of the café regulars and warmly greeted by individuals in both local churches, I felt isolated and lonely as a consequence of being a temporary resident and unsure of my place or position in the wider community.

It was most clearly illustrated when I attended the events of the local gala day at the beginning of Civic Week. At the service for the 'Kirk of the Queen', I observed the pomp and ceremony of formal processions and announcements. As the queen and her court (students in their final year of primary school) entered the building I followed instructions for sitting and standing and joined in the hymns. During the short service I was comfortable and felt like I had a place, helping to lead the singing and encourage families to participate. Once the service ended I was unsure of what I should do next. Should I follow people up the hill? Where were events due to take place? Was there a place for me? Would I know anyone?

I found myself on the edges and outskirts of groups and discussions which took place behind closed doors. As I was not one of the 'inner circle' I felt lost and deeply uncomfortable. I wanted to be part of the community, but I saw few of the people with whom I had established relationships in the town. Many of the café regulars were similarly ostracised from the proceedings as they did not have children or grandchildren in the school. It was a day designed for young families, but even within the families and committees I saw tension and heard reports of conflicting plans or expectations. One Messy Church parent responded to my greeting in a distracted fashion, constantly turning [their] head to keep an eye on [their] children, committee members, volunteers and watching for potential problems. I commented on the amount of work required and was given a strained smile with a wry glance and immediately felt like I was contributing to the chaos of the day by speaking to [them].

Following a coronation ceremony many of the older students, parents and committee members retreated into a closed tent for a private reception. I was puzzled by the apparent lack of coherent planning or preparation for those who

were not attending the reception. The few tents and activities set up around the field had an air of neglect that I found hard to assess. I wandered around and listened to snatches of conversation, noticing the children's activity area was both limited in its options and exorbitantly priced. I privately agreed with a woman who looked at it and said,

"What?! £12 per child for a bouncy castle, a couple of hoops and a climbing frame?! Who would pay that?!"

In the absence of any relational connection, I drifted away after a short time feeling deflated and isolated. It was a day designed for insiders. For people with children and families. There was no provision for an outsider, even one who had lived in Braedubh for nearly two years.

In Riverglebe, my experience was completely different. Unlike Braedubh, when my fieldwork began there were few local community groups or activities happening in the village. In the early months of my association with the village I felt like there was no 'community', just a collection of houses with loose connections. In June 2017 I met with the minister to discuss my early findings and impressions. I responded by saying that I felt the priority for the church should be investing in community-building and contributing to the social capital of the village which, in my opinion, had 'lost its heart.'³⁶⁷ Unbeknown to me, a church elder had already begun developing a plan for investing in the local community.

In September 2017 an open meeting was held for people in Riverglebe and those who were interested in supporting the village. The elder introduced a plan of proposed activities and events, asking for feedback and contributions. In their opening statement the elder used the phrase, 'restoring the heart of the community' as a way of explaining the purpose of their idea. The people in the

³⁶⁷ The role of churches in building social capital in rural communities has been widely discussed. A few notable examples include: Fred Olney and Lewis Burton, 'Parish Church and Village Community: The Interchange of Social Capital in a Rural Setting', *Rural Theology* 9, no. 1, (29 July 2011), pp. 27–38; Ineson and Burton, 'Social Capital Generated by Two Rural Churches', pp. 216–28; David Walker, 'The Social Significance of Harvest Festivals in the Countryside: An Empirical Enquiry among Those Who Attend', in *Rural Life and Rural Church: Theological and Empirical Perspectives*, ed. Leslie J. Francis and Mandy Robbins, (Bristol: Equinox, 2012), pp. 266–80.

meeting agreed that it was a great vision and began using the phrase when they were talking about possibilities for the future. I was encouraged as it perfectly mirrored my sense of the challenge facing Riverglebe.

Over the following months I was privileged to be involved as people volunteered to participate in different activities. Although I was an outsider who did not live in the village, I was able to find a place where I was welcomed and generally became a familiar face and personality in the village. I supported film nights, attended meetings and was appointed to the committee for the gala day. I joined in preparations for a Christmas concert and became a founding member of the village choir.

There were difficulties in the first months, particularly with proposed film nights in the church. They required significant investments in time and resources and failed to attract a large audience. As I reflected on them, I concluded that multiple factors contributed to their mixed success. The first, and most obvious, was promoting the film nights. They were the first events of a new initiative. The organisers had good reasons for assuming that a film night could be a positive way of facilitating contact with members of the community. They had invested time, energy and financial resources in ensuring that everything was well prepared. They had posted signs and placed adverts in the local paper, but they were individuals with limited contacts among villagers. Why would people attend an event in a church building without some form of connection with other people who might be there?

Additional practical factors included the accessibility of the building and lack of facilities. Poor lighting on the stairs and path through the graveyard to the door on dark winter nights made access difficult. Poorly cushioned pews were uncomfortable to sit on for long periods and the heating was limited. The organisers had been conscientious about providing refreshments for the evenings, but the lack of toilet facilities in the building contributed to the complications for visitors.

Despite these challenges, the Riverglebe Village Events initiative transformed the community. By prioritising social connections and celebrating local investment, the project successfully reinvigorated a sense of belonging and

participation. From my perspective the initiative also succeeded at bridging the gap between the church and community in subtle ways. The fact that the building provided a home for events and church members were actively involved in supporting activities reinforced the connection, signalling that church cared about the community. In a time when the village was suffering from the loss of local businesses and shops, the church provided a necessary counternarrative.

5.6.5 Village Choir

One of the best examples of the development of social capital was the formation of Riverglebe village choir. It began as an experiment to bring together a group of local people to sing some Christmas songs for a community Christmas concert and carol service in Riverglebe church. In early November 2017 we began meeting in the church building on a Tuesday evening under the leadership of a local music teacher. The first night was a good laugh with nine people tentatively trying to sing together. Very few had previous choir experience but came because they enjoyed singing. By the end of the practice people had laid their fears and anxieties aside and went away humming with shining eyes and big smiles to tell their friends to come along.

As people heard about the rehearsals and the fun we had, more people started joining in. A sense of unity and purpose helped the group come together because we knew we were preparing for a Christmas event on a specific date. The laughter and conversations that happened before, during and after practices helped people relax. People began commenting that they were meeting new people and getting to know each other better. As the weeks passed people began coming earlier, walking along the road together and chatting with their neighbours, before arriving in the church ready to join in another night of music.

After a successful Christmas performance there was an overwhelming request from the members for the choir to become a regular group.

“Welcome to the newly formed Riverglebe Community Choir! It is so good to see everyone here. I’d like to thank D— for being willing to lead us and thank the church for letting us meet here. I’d also like to stress that this is a community thing, not a church thing, we’re just using the building.”

After the Christmas concert enthusiasm was high and D— kept it going by bringing in songs that were immediately recognisable. D— asked for suggestions and even created arrangements that were suitable for the range of abilities and experience represented in the group. Many had never sung in a choir before, apart from Christmas, and were intimidated by the idea of singing in parts or looking at music. Most were willing, and D— encouraged everyone to sing out and enjoy themselves.

Over the subsequent months the choir became an integral part of the social calendar for the village, as well as boosting everyone's spirits. One member admitted suffering depression during the winter months but remarked with surprise, 'I've done well this year! Singing must be good for me!'

The choir brought church members and villagers together in a natural way, fostering relationships that superseded social differences. People from low-income housing stood next to business owners. Teenagers stood with retirees. English people stood with Scottish people. Some people came from beyond the village and were welcomed with open arms because it was a choir for fun and there were no limits. When my fieldwork ended, there were 35 regular members, all of whom were fully committed to learning together and singing with enthusiasm.

5.7 Summary: Singing a New Song

My experiences in Braedubh and Riverglebe stimulated my reflections on my understanding of mission and ministry. As I confronted my presuppositions about rural parish churches, I also challenged my assumptions about the focus and development of the public witness of the church in the local community. I thought of mission and ministry in traditionally evangelical ways, spending my formative years in gathered congregations where people attended because they felt an affinity with the normative theology of the church or denomination. Through my fieldwork, I developed an appreciation for the possibilities of parish ministry, prioritising ministry among people based on their geographical location rather than their interests or affinities. Although not a perfect analogy, the metaphor of a choir gave me a framework for articulating my approach to fieldwork as well as a guiding metaphor for my understanding of rural parish

churches. Throughout, I asked myself whether there was a cohesive repertoire to give me an indication of what type of choir each church might be.

I chose to begin by highlighting the importance of welcome and belonging. My first impression of both churches continued to influence my investigation, even as I became part of the local churches. The lack of clarity over each church's vision and purpose made me question their effectiveness and long-term sustainability. My reflections on leadership and the possibility of developing a team approach to ministry highlighted the twin priorities of succession planning and communication, both of which I will return to in Chapter 7. As I reflected on the purpose of regular Sunday services, I argued that they should intentionally focus on equipping church members to engage in mission, a theme I will develop in Chapter 8. I recognised that regular patterns of worship might be familiar to church members but failed to reflect the importance of discipleship and training.

In turning my attention from the narrow focus of Sunday services and the contained unit of regular attenders in the parish church, I introduced the wide range of opportunities for public engagement. By doing so, I shifted my emphasis from internal self-evaluation of the structure and organisation of rural parish churches to the possibilities for mission in the parish. Each of my experiences emphasized the extent to which parish churches cannot, and should not, be separated from their parish contexts. For Braedubh, the parish church had an opportunity to work ecumenically with other churches and Messy Church to provide a consistent Christian witness in the village. For Riverglebe, the future of the church was inextricably linked with investing in the community through practical and social support.

After both metaphorically and literally joining the choir in these Border churches, I began to transition from an incoming participant to an active initiator and accepted member of the community. Based on my assessment of the priorities for both churches, I took an active role as compere for a gala day in Riverglebe and initiated a regular ecumenical gathering in Braedubh. Chapter 6 records my involvement and further development of my argument for changing the current model of rural mission and ministry.

Chapter 6 Compere for the Day: Moving from ‘Incoming’ to Belonging

Today did not quite go as I’d planned. We knew it would be important to have a ‘town crier’ to announce the gala court and I was happy to write the proclamation and present it at the start of the day, but I was unprepared to step into the role of compere for the entire day!

It all started when P— asked me to announce the start of the children’s games. Then D— passed me the time sheet for the rest of the activities and asked me to announce them at the appropriate time. Then R— approached and asked me to highlight the competition in [their] tent. Within a very short space of time I became the public face and voice of the gala day. People asked me questions, reported lost and found items, laughed or cheered and generally got involved in the mayhem and fun of the day as I encouraged participation and kept people informed throughout the event.

I was planning to run a tent inviting reflections and discussions about the role of the church in the local area, but instead, I found myself thrust into the limelight as the person responsible for telling everyone what was happening and when. My own plans and ideas were put aside as I focused on what was actually needed to ensure the gala day was a success.

“Be sure to sign up for the tug-of-war competition! 8 members to a team. We already have teams from T—, F—, and -C—. Do you have a team ready?”

“The egg and spoon race for the 8-10s will be starting in 2 minutes. Assemble at the corner of the green next to the C— tent.”

“I’ve just been given a set of car keys. If anyone is missing their keys, come find me by the pig pen.”

“And here it is, the time you’ve all be waiting for, please join me in welcoming T— who will announce the winners of the pig decorating competition!”

“The fish and chip van is arriving! Please stay clear of the van until it is set up next to the tea tent.”

“Are you ready for the family quiz? We’ll be starting in 10 minutes. You can get a quiz sheet from K— at the front of the stage.”

“It is my privilege to welcome the Riverglebe village choir to the stage for their first open air performance!”

“I’d like you to join me in thanking the members of the committee and various participating businesses, organisations and volunteers who have supported our gala day! I’m now going to hand the mic to E— as chair of the committee.”

The second phase of my research involved moving into a more active role as a facilitator and initiator in the churches and communities. I actively transitioned into a more visible and vocal position as a valued member of the churches and villages, providing leadership and initiating conversations or discussions and meetings. In this chapter I describe three primary events or initiatives where I fulfilled the role of facilitator or initiator. I reflect on what they reveal about the future of mission and ministry in parish churches, in dialogue with existing scholarship. These include the importance of reflection, evaluation, ending and re-seeding.

Building on the previous chapter, I discuss the implications of bridging gaps between churches, both ecumenically and within linked charges, and moving beyond the walls of church buildings to engage with the local community. As I consider the value and importance of communication, relationality, presence, and witness, I continue exploring questions about the purpose of the church in the local community and who is responsible for mission and ministry. I draw parallels between my experience and that of ordained clergy, arguing that a sustainable future for mission and ministry involves a shift in roles and responsibilities. This chapter uses my transition from an unknown incomer to a known and familiar member of Braedubh and Riverglebe to illustrate the importance of ‘belonging’ for the future of mission and ministry in rural parish churches.

6.1 Enter the Compere

A local Gala Day, Civic Week, Agricultural Show, Gathering or Games is a common feature among rural Scottish towns and villages. It is a time for community members and groups to come together for a celebration and party. Tents, tables, displays and marquees offer passing people the opportunity to support local tradespeople, community groups, schools, churches, societies and

more. Local schoolchildren are involved and lauded as king and queen for the day, with responsibilities for handing out prizes and adjudicating fancy dress competitions. Family activities such as races, a quiz, bouncy castles, bingo, quoits,³⁶⁸ and the hotly contested tug-of-war competition provide entertainment, while food and drink are available from various tents and food trucks. Music can be heard throughout the day, or week, beginning with the pipe band and parade down the street to the green and ending with a local band in the evening. Above it all, the voice of the compere or master of ceremonies can be heard, welcoming participants, announcing games and winners, encouraging participation, offering advice and information about the events in the day and the various groups or people represented. The compere is the person who functions as the primary communicator and has the responsibility of keeping people informed and the day running smoothly. She, or he, is the visible representative of the countless hours of planning and work contributed by everyone involved in preparing for the main event.

In Riverglebe, I was the compere.

6.1.1 Reinstating Gala Day through Teamwork

My role as compere was the public embodiment of a long and involved process of planning on the part of a team of people with a unified vision. One of the priorities for the village events group in Riverglebe was reinstating the Gala Day after a hiatus of fifteen years. The break had come about as a result of interpersonal difficulties, a lack of interest, poor planning and communication, a lack of resources and a general apathy. The day had become ‘boring’ and there was little opportunity to try anything new. Instead of bringing people together, the Gala revealed or exacerbated underlying tensions and divisions within the village. The Gala Day ceased to be a day for the community to gather together and celebrate, failing to fulfil its social function in facilitating community participation. As a result, it ended, leaving a gap in the social calendar of the village as people drifted away to participate in activities in other places.

³⁶⁸ A game where players throw a ring of rope, rubber or metal towards a spike in the ground, aiming to land on or near it. A variation of the game is played in North America with horseshoes.

In early 2018 the Riverglebe Village Events initiative began actively considering the possibility of reinstating Gala Day to address the state of village morale and invest in increasing social capital. Members of the group felt that Gala Day could be a good opportunity to prioritise the community in the village, seeking to ‘restore the heart of the community’ in a tangible and highly visible way, building on the success of the community choir and the Christmas concert. The population of Riverglebe had changed in the intervening years since the last Gala Day with many newcomers moving into the area and a new generation of schoolchildren to be involved.

The Gala Day committee was made up of local people who lived in the village or the immediate area, including several church members. There were a few locals who had been resident in the area for an extended period of years and remembered previous Gala Days, but the vast majority had moved into the area during the hiatus. Several of these were actively involved in other local clubs or on the community council and viewed participation in the committee as another way of building up the community spirit. Three individuals had moved into the area mere months before and saw participation as a way of integrating with the local community.³⁶⁹

In keeping with my research model, I attended the first few committee meetings as an active supporter of the locally driven initiative. I participated in discussions and conversations about all aspects of the day, identifying myself as an active member of the group. I knew many of the people from other events, such as the choir or the film nights, and this made it easier to develop a good rapport. After four meetings a local villager nominated me to be a member of the core committee, recognising my contributions and commitment to the success of the venture.

“In order for us to open a bank account we need to be formally constituted as a community group with a core committee. I propose the following people to make up the committee: E—, Heather, R— and D—.”

³⁶⁹ Cf. ‘Lifestyle shifters’ in Walker, ‘Belonging’, p. 87.

I raised my head in surprise at being nominated as a member of the committee. After all, I did not actually live in Riverglebe and my association with the local area was tenuous at best.

“Does anyone have any questions or objections?”

There was silence. I looked around at the people in the room who had not been nominated. Did they feel slighted?

“In the absence of any objections, I move that we approve these members as the core committee members. This is purely for the purposes of registering as a community group with a bank account. Obviously, we still want everyone to be involved with planning and participating in Gala Day. Would anyone like to propose anyone else for the core committee?”

As a group we were fortunate to have a wide range of skills and expertise represented. Each member freely offered their knowledge and was willing to apply their skills in putting the day together. One volunteered to act as treasurer and investigated the banking options. Another took minutes of meetings and handled web and social media presence. One offered to liaise with the council about licences and insurance. Another contacted local businesses about sponsorship or financial contributions. The local hotelier offered to run a bar tent. One offered to use his woodworking skills to create animal cut-outs that could be decorated and set up around the village to raise awareness and encourage community involvement. Another worked at the local school and facilitated communication with schoolchildren and families about different competitions. Everyone served in the ways they felt most comfortable and everyone worked together to support each other in realising the dream of a gala day to remember. It was inspiring and illustrated what might be possible if rural churches had clear visions and brought people together to use their gifts.³⁷⁰

As I reflected on possible theological parallels I was reminded of the New Testament church in Acts 2:42-47 and Paul’s exhortations to the Roman and

³⁷⁰ Cf. Ann Atkins, ‘A Variety of Gifts: The People of God’, in *Diverse Gifts: Varieties of Lay and Ordained Ministries in the Church and Community*, ed. Malcolm Torry, (Norwich: Canterbury, 2006), pp. 14–25; Anne Richards and Joanna Cox, ‘Lay Leadership and Lay Development’, in *Reshaping Rural Ministry: A Theological and Practical Handbook*, ed. James Bell, Jill Hopkinson, and Trevor Willmott, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009), pp. 118–39, at pp. 128–33; Methodist Church of Great Britain et al., *A Discipling Presence*, pp. 40–44; Rural Affairs Group, ‘Released for Mission’, pp. 24–25.

Corinthian believers (Rom. 12:3-13; 1 Cor. 12:4-31). Each example demonstrates the importance of people sharing their gifts for the common good of the community. Riverglebe adopted this approach in the Village Events initiative and reinstating the Gala Day, encouraging a collaborative endeavour that was fully supported by each member. The resulting vision was bigger than any one individual and required a team effort in its fulfilment.

6.1.2 Starting a New Tradition

As I looked around the room, I was struck by the number of people who want to be involved in this project. E– has provided the push they needed to get together and make Gala Day happen. Everyone is excited about the possibilities and it is easy to see that they want to make it a success. I find it fascinating that they are looking forward to the future of Gala Day, remembering past Gala Days but happy for the actual form to be something completely new. They are inspired by the past but not bound by the form and structure of previous gala days. As E– has said repeatedly, “we can start a new tradition.”

This approach of starting a new tradition *inspired* by the past is a useful model for developing new initiatives. The original gala day had ceased to be effective or fulfil its primary purpose of bringing the community together to celebrate. Instead, it had become a source of division and tension. Rather than struggle on with diminishing interest and resources, it died. This allowed space for it to be reborn, or resurrected, fifteen years later.

There were multiple factors involved in this process. As I investigated, I heard multiple stories of the historic relational tensions and fractures within the village between people with competing ideas. A small group of people with long-term involvement in the gala were threatened by the influence of outsiders, while newcomers felt marginalised and undervalued.³⁷¹ Communication was limited to those with direct contacts in the organising committee and there were very few opportunities for encouraging participation. Some of those involved lost interest after their children left the primary school,

³⁷¹ Cf. Discussions around rural repopulation in Woods, *Rural*, pp. 181-88.

while others felt they could not maintain the level of commitment required to organise a big event.

The fifteen-year hiatus allowed for a change in the demographic with new people moving into the area and a new generation of children and young families getting involved in the school. There was a noticeable gap in the social life of the village, creating a need for some form of centralised event to bring the community together and celebrate village life. The impetus of village events beginning galvanised the community, reigniting their enthusiasm and providing an opportunity for creative ideas. People had big dreams that were welcomed, making people feel like they could be part of the community by participating in regular activities and planning one-off events.³⁷²

Stories of the previous years were shared, but the majority of those who joined in the planning and execution of the gala day and the necessary preparation and set up had little personal investment in trying to recreate or preserve the past without changes. Instead, they could create an ideal, looking for the opportunity to express their own interests, personalities, families and understanding of community. As the planning group discussed possibilities there were no limits on creative ideas. Suggestions were made by people willing to implement them and every meeting ended with a list of action points for various members of the group. In doing so, they talked about how it might be continued in the future, as the start of a new tradition.

6.1.3 A New Gala Day

The day itself was the culmination of months of planning and discussions. We, the committee, spent days agreeing on the layout of the village green, setting up marquees, arranging electricity and assembling staging. We delivered leaflets to every house, posted signs, took out adds in the local paper and used social media to spread the word. A local craftsman prepared wooden pigs as a means of inviting community participation in publicity. We invited residents to

³⁷² Cf. Walker, *God's Belongers*, pp. 29-36.

decorate a pig and set it up around the village for judging and to raise awareness of the gala day.

The pig decorating competition, which began as a 'silly' suggestion, became an overnight sensation as people proudly displayed pigs in their windows and front gardens. There was even a church pig! As more pigs went up, more people wanted to decorate a pig. There was such demand that the volunteer who offered to cut them was pushed to triple the number [they] had originally planned to make. Everyone who saw them began asking questions about their purpose. They were visible and intriguing, capturing the interest and imagination of the people who passed through Riverglebe.

I arrived in the morning prepared to help with any remaining jobs and found myself carrying supplies to/from cars, assisting with setting up the bar tent, the tea tent and the main stage. I helped one of the committee members construct a 'pig pen' at the base of the monument where people could bring their pigs and set them up for everyone to appreciate in the course of the day. At every turn I looked for opportunities to work alongside the local people to ensure that the day would be a success. I found opportunities for engaging in conversations and discussions about the challenges facing the village and reflecting on their implications for my research as I worked alongside people. My experiences confirmed that a future for rural mission and ministry requires committing to the local village or parish and investing in social capital through community development and relationships.³⁷³

The official programme for the day began with a pipe band procession as the royal court, chosen from among the local school children, marched from the church to the village green. In my role as 'town crier' I welcomed residents and visitors to the coronation of the court by the previous gala queen, returning to the village after 15 years. Once the court had been introduced, the festivities truly began with food and drinks, games, competitions and plenty of opportunities for fun.

³⁷³ Cf. Bell, Hopkinson and Willmott, 'Reading the Context', pp. 11-16.

I became compere in an unplanned and largely arbitrary way as an extension of my original role in welcoming people to the gala and introducing the court. Although I had not planned to take on that role or spend the following eight hours providing a running commentary on the day, acting as quiz master for the family quiz, hosting the open mic and providing 'filler' stand-up comedy or musical entertainment, it was quickly apparent that my involvement was a key element in the success or failure of the event as a whole. The role of compere was the component that became the 'glue' for the event, making it possible for people to actively participate because they knew what was happening. It brought the disparate parts and aspects of planning together as a cohesive event.

Ironically, when we had been planning the day and discussing different games or competitions, contributions from local community groups and a general programme of events, we had not considered the means of communicating the plans with the people who might attend. We had printed leaflets with a general timetable but had underestimated the number of people who might attend. The committee agreed a rough estimate of between 500 and 650 people attended the gala day, well in excess of the 250-300 people we had hoped might come to support our endeavours.

The day was a cacophony of noise and colour. As compere, I was required to be everywhere at once, keeping people informed about the races and games, encouraging their participation and even engaging in sporting commentary on the tug-of-war competition. As I circulated, I kept my eyes open and looked for opportunities to promote different groups and participants, particularly those charitable organisations who were supporting the gala day as a means of raising awareness about their group. By providing a regular flow of information, I filled a gap in the experience of the event and made it possible for outsiders to feel included. There were very few moments where I was not watching for opportunities to encourage people to be involved. As I had become a familiar face to many over the course of my fieldwork, I was able to talk with most of the local villagers and many approached me through the day if they had specific questions.

As the races and sports competitions ended many of the outside visitors drifted away. We had been intentional about ensuring plenty of food and drink was available on the green for people who did not want to go home to cook, but the day moved into a quieter period in the late afternoon as we prepared for the family quiz. The person who planned the quiz asked me to be quiz master and I was soon surrounded by schoolchildren who wanted to help me read out the questions. With much laughter and friendly competition, people found seats on the ground, benches and chairs brought from home. After several rounds we acclaimed the winners and prepared for a talent show where people could participate and show off their talents alongside performances by the Riverglebe Community choir (in their first outdoor performance) and other young musicians.

The evening ended with small groups gathered in conversation. Young families had drifted away and several of the smaller tents had been taken down and removed. Members of the committee worked together to pack up the tea tent and clear out anything that could not be left for the following day. I continued to circulate, joining in small groups and discussing the day as I gathered impressions and opinions to add to my own mental notes. Several people invited me to sit down, observing that I had been on my feet all day and had earned a break! I laughed with them over the chaos and unpredictability of the day, accepting their compliments, but I was too wound up to be able to sit still for long. I felt that my job was not finished until everything was packed away and the rest of the committee were also able to sit down.

Finally, as darkness fell and the rain began in earnest, the last few groups moved into the hotel bar for a well-earned rest and reflection on the event. We confirmed plans for taking down the marquees and for meeting as a committee two weeks later to review and evaluate the day, identifying what we learned and what we might be able to use the following year. Everyone was tired and relieved that it was over, but also thrilled with the response of people in the local area and beyond.

As I drove home tonight, I couldn't help laughing to myself as the adrenaline started to wear off. I had not accomplished any of the things I intended to do during this gala day. All my plans for engaging with a community analysis of the church and

possibilities for the future had been completely derailed by the immediate need for a compere.

I am exhausted, but also elated at the success of the endeavour. I just witnessed an extraordinary day full of people coming together. It was the culmination of months of planning with different people contributing ideas and supporting each other in implementing them. There were no disasters and most of the people who attended were enthusiastic and complimentary.

I'm sure we will have plenty to discuss at our next meeting but for now, I'm going to sleep with a smile on my face.

6.1.4 Reflecting, Evaluating and Planning

Taking time to reflect and evaluate the Gala Day was a key element for the Riverglebe Village Events committee. Every member of the committee had been fully involved in the day and in the process of setting up and tearing down. They were all local, having informal conversations with people before and after the event. I also spent time in and around the village, talking with local people and getting their impressions. We were all eager to know what people thought so we could learn from it and apply those lessons in the following year.

The feedback we received was overwhelmingly positive. Locals reflected that the gala days of previous years had been quiet affairs by comparison but were pleased that it appeared to be good natured family fun. Visitors to the area who were staying in the hotel or holiday lets were thoroughly impressed. One couple approached me the following day, overflowing with compliments. Other members of the committee received similar comments from locals and visitors alike.

Various issues were raised in the days following the event, most notably controversy over a photographer. As a committee we had invited a photographer to attend the event so we could have photos for an article in the local paper, for use on social media and any future promotional material. Announcements were made throughout the day, the school children who were members of the court had signed permission slips and there was a written notice on the order of events; however, we had not been prepared for the changes to UK General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), which were implemented in May

2018, the week prior to our Gala Day. One parent objected to the official photos in the days following the event, threatening legal action, and we immediately responded by removing all photos from social media which had been taken by the photographer.

Despite appearances indicating that the objection was based on personal history between the parent and the photographer, as this same parent publicly posted their own photos of the day, it raised a significant and difficult issue for the committee. We had neglected to consider the legal issues and potential problems for promoting or reporting events in a changing culture with increasingly complex regulations responding to the prevalence of social media. Although the Riverglebe Gala Day was a small, local, rural village event, photos and promotional materials could be accessed by anyone if they were published on public pages or in electronic editions of the local paper. The experience illustrated the potential pitfalls for new initiatives and the importance of having administrative and legal support.

There were other minor complaints or observations. One local had complained about the noise, but, as one member of the committee observed with a grin, shaking [their] head and rolling [their] eyes,

‘A– complains about everything. Didn’t want to actually support the event because [they] fell out with A– years ago, but did you see [them] sitting in [their] garden to “keep an eye” on things? Ha! Can’t fool me. Some people are just like that. [They] came over on Sunday to ask if any of the pigs were going spare. Didn’t want to buy one to decorate before the gala day, but happy enough to take one home for the grandchildren!’

In rural communities, much of the daily life and contact with people relies on mutual goodwill and personal relationships. As a committee we filtered through compliments and complaints alike, recognising some of the underlying relational tensions. Within Riverglebe there was a noticeable class distinction between the people living in the lower income housing estate and those in the larger detached properties on the edge of the village or around the green. Locals who thought the hotel owner charged ‘city prices’ for food and drink were annoyed at the prices for the beer tent. Surprisingly, people who had not spoken for

years had been seen chatting together good-naturedly and volunteering to help take down the marquees. Despite interpersonal tensions and differences of opinion, the Gala Day had succeeded in being an event that brought together the entire village community with a single focus on a shared goal: enjoying a day of celebration and fun.

As the committee met to reflect on the experience, we could not help laughing at the way the day had surpassed our hopes and expectations. E— had big dreams when [they] first suggested the idea and we had all invested time and energy in it, but a tiny seed of doubt in the back of our minds questioned whether it might be a ‘one-off’ rather than the beginning of a new era for the Gala Day. The day had, instead, left us brimming with ideas. People made new suggestions and discussed what worked and what might need to change for the following year.

6.1.5 Reflections and Considerations

*I wanted to actively support the local initiatives that emerged from or involved church members, but I had thought my primary area of action was going to be in developing church projects with a focus on mission and discipleship. Instead, I found people were more passionate about the community. The **spark** for Riverglebe was in connecting with the community. They had little understanding or consideration for mission and ministry, but they understood people and the potential for creating a sense of fellowship by sharing in experiences.*

I should have guessed that these people would care more about having fun together than talking about another dry dusty ‘church’ thing when they saw the church as old and outdated, but it was a surprise to compare their enthusiasm for the choir or the gala day with how passive and uninterested they were in talking about church-focused initiatives or the building.

My experiences of that initial Gala Day and all the planning or discussions illustrated different aspects of the possibilities for developing and sustaining initiatives in rural villages. In this section I will highlight four: *vision*, *teamwork*, *communication* and *evaluation*. First, there was a clear vision and goal from the outset. A team of people actively supported that goal and were released to develop their own ideas and use their skills and abilities. Communication was a

key element in the success of the Gala Day. People were told what was happening and invited to participate throughout the process. Finally, the team who planned the event took time to reflect and evaluate the day in its entirety, learning from the experience in planning for the future.

The Gala Day itself was an event rather than a regular activity, providing a clearly defined and measurable goal or endpoint for the team to work towards. It was dependent on the combined efforts of a team of people who were committed to a shared vision. It was both practical and representative of the much larger vision of ‘restoring the heart in the community’. The Gala Day was a visible representation of the community working together and celebrating together. As such, it embodied the original impetus for forming the Riverglebe Village Events group. Everyone who participated in the Village Events group, the community choir, the Gala Day committee and other social groups was given an opportunity to share their perspective and contribute to shaping the village story in a way that reflected their creativity and diversity.³⁷⁴

The Village Events group began because one person shared their vision and passion for the village, inviting others to participate. It grew because people contributed their own perspectives, ideas and support in furthering that goal. There were practical milestones and smaller events that led up to the big event, each one building anticipation and enthusiasm as people ‘bought in’ to the idea of working towards a sense of community life and belonging through participating in regular activities and events.³⁷⁵ There was space for the dream to grow and develop as people brought their own skills or abilities and offered to use them. There were still tensions between individuals who had competing ideas but there was a sense of space for allowing people to do things in their own way, provided that they stayed focused on the goal, which formed the foundation for effective teamwork.³⁷⁶

Building a team, or a team of teams, in this way makes it possible for an initiative to develop and build momentum. It does not rely on the specific skills

³⁷⁴ Cf. Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, pp. 107-24.

³⁷⁵ Cf. Walker, ‘Belonging’, pp. 92-93.

³⁷⁶ Cf. Elford, *Creating the Future*, p. 61.

or talents of one individual and, therefore, is not limited by those skills. Being part of the process as a member of the committee gave me an insight into the foundations for developing a team as I watched the original visionary openly admit [their] limitations, actively inviting people to come up with creative ideas and carry them out. This individual focused on reminding people about the goal and working behind the scenes to support ideas in practical ways rather than acting as an autocratic leader who set an agenda and imposed a plan. I found it inspiring, reflecting that this type of collaborative model might change the trajectory of rural mission and ministry in a time when clergy are increasingly stretched with responsibilities for multiple parishes or charges.³⁷⁷

Clear communication is vital for the development, implementation and sustainability of initiatives. Through the process of participating in the Riverglebe Village Events committee I witnessed the impact of repeatedly communicating with people at every stage. We had regular meetings as a committee and looked for opportunities to talk about our plans with others or deliver leaflets and invite people to participate. We invited feedback and participation throughout the planning stages and increased the possible avenues of communication as we neared the event. This involved a variety of mediums from hand-delivered printed leaflets and adverts in the paper to posters, social media posts, announcements at other community events and the decorated pigs. Word of mouth was a key component as people spoke to each other about what was happening and shared their own enthusiasm. Smaller events and meetings, such as concerts, choir practices and committee meetings in the pub, were opportunities for people to get involved and invite others to participate.

The importance of clear communication was illustrated in my role as compere. All the work that had been done by teams of people in preparation might have failed to accomplish its purpose in bringing the community together without someone to provide an overview of the disparate parts and encourage participation. By filling that role, I was able to highlight the different activities and invite people to engage in activities, making the event accessible to people who had not been part of the planning committee.

³⁷⁷ Cf. Grundy, *Multi-Congregation Ministry*, pp. 74-104.

This emphasis on communication stands in stark contrast with my experiences in local churches and even with other comparable events in Braedubh, such as the Civic Week. There was an unspoken assumption that people who ‘belonged’ would know about upcoming events, so churches and groups made a passing reference to them rather than explicitly inviting people to attend or explaining what might be happening. The Christingle service in Braedubh suffered from a lack of explicit communication about what people might expect and poorly defined goals for the event itself. Those who were members of the Messy Church group or the planning team were prepared but ordinary church members were only given information about the time and place. This creates a barrier for people who do not ‘belong’, resulting in bewilderment and isolation. In consequence, there is a different type of belonging between those who make the plans and those who simply attend or participate.³⁷⁸ Comparing both villages demonstrates the importance of clear lines of communication and thinking creatively about the ways and means for extending an invitation or facilitating participation, which has the potential to transform the impact of rural initiatives.

In addition to the basic framework of vision, teamwork and communication, my experience with the Riverglebe Gala Day highlighted the importance of reflection and evaluation. It was a new initiative and everyone expected that it would be a learning experience. We were prepared to meet and reflect on the positive and negative aspects of the day, evaluating the successes or failures and how that might shape our plans for the following year. Our discussions were honest and practical, grounded in the knowledge that there should be room for improvement that might mean significant changes or eliminating things. Adopting a process of reflection and evaluation enables the people involved in an initiative to respond appropriately to their specific context.³⁷⁹ Sustainable rural mission and ministry should incorporate a similar process of regular evaluation and revision, involving people with diverse experiences and perspectives to share in the conversation.

³⁷⁸ Walker, ‘Belonging’, p. 94.

³⁷⁹ This is foundational to the Mission Action Planning approach to new church initiatives. Mike Chew, Mark Ireland, and David Banbury, *How to Do Mission Action Planning: Prayer, Process and Practice*, Revised and expanded, (London: SPCK, 2016), pp. 33–59.

As I thought about the possible parallels between the Riverglebe Gala Day and rural churches I reflected on the tendency to hold on to ministries or traditions which no longer fulfil their original purpose. The end of the original Gala Day was necessary to leave space for people to examine their priorities. In the same way, there are ministries or programmes which no longer function in accordance with their original goal or design and should be stopped or allowed to die.³⁸⁰

Rather than continuing to spend time, effort and resources in maintaining dysfunctional traditions, churches should evaluate *why* particular practices are significant. After they have ended, the church will have the time and energy to look for different, creative and more contextually appropriate ways of achieving the same goals and purposes. In some cases, this may require living with a gap for a period of time. Based on the Riverglebe gala, the gap was necessary to accommodate changing relationships and make space for new people with new skills and ideas. There was space for something new to take root and grow because the ground had been cleared.³⁸¹

The concept of cultivation, crop rotation and allowing land to lie fallow for a time before reintroducing a new crop is well attested in sustainable farming practices. It is also biblical, reflecting a seven-year cycle established in Old Testament laws concerning the Sabbath (Exod. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:2-7).

Theologically and practically, a pattern of planting, harvesting, resting and re-seeding has the potential to reinvigorate struggling rural churches by giving them permission to let go of things which are no longer functioning and try something creative or different. Clearing the land would provide space for re-seeding something new, a process which could be applied within the parish churches in Braedubh and Riverglebe.

While the Gala Day was not a church event, it was an illuminating experience and should be applied as a useful example for shaping a rural approach to revitalising mission and ministry. It brought together history with the local context and relied on teamwork with local people. Rather than being bound by tradition, the Gala Day became an opportunity to try new things. The vision and goal of bringing the village community together was clearly stated and

³⁸⁰ Cf. Aisthorpe, *Rewilding the Church*, pp. 156-79.

³⁸¹ Cf. Gaze, *Mission-shaped and Rural*, pp. 86-101.

repeatedly reinforced. As a large-scale annual event, it offers important insights into the potential for public engagement events in local villages or towns. The team that assembled for the ‘one-off’ event found opportunities to engage in smaller activities and regular gatherings.³⁸² A network of people were involved throughout and it felt like a community initiative as a result. It was not perfect and there were challenges along the way, but it was effective.

6.2 Joint Churches Gathering

While Riverglebe demonstrated the importance of connecting with the village, the primary focus of my research in Braedubh was focused on networking between church groups. In the early stages of my research, it became clear that communication between churches was ineffective, causing problems between churches in the local area and highlighting tensions for church members, villages and ministers. In early 2018, I invited Braedubh parish church, Northfield Evangelical church, the churches linked with Braedubh in the presbytery, Messy Church, the Christian Youth Trust and Freshfield, the local ‘Fresh Expression’, to an ecumenical gathering where representatives could share their focus and plans, building relationships and spending time reflecting on the possibilities for mission and ministry in the local area. Gatherings were scheduled every few months, in a variety of locations to encourage participation from different individuals and demonstrate commitment to meeting people in their local place.

6.2.1 First Gathering

It's a start, but I wanted it to be so much more. I had so many ideas and hopes, forgetting that other people are not in my head and do not have the same knowledge or experience. I should have realised it would be difficult to have multiple people presenting within the time I'd arranged. I was not prepared for J— to take 15 minutes for a sermon when I'd asked for a 3-minute overview of what is happening in [their] church....

It was worth it and I learned some important lessons, but this is not going to be easy. There are such different backgrounds and perspectives represented in these churches. Some of them have so much history and conflict. It was encouraging to hear A— and

³⁸² Walker, ‘Belonging’, p. 94.

H— talking about how good it was to be together, but I wonder whether it will continue.

M— was right when [they] said, ‘Well done, this type of gathering needs a facilitator.’

The first ‘Joint Churches’ gathering in Braedubh taught me important lessons about preparing and facilitating an ecumenical evening in a rural area. I spent days preparing, speaking to people about attending and trying to find an evening that would suit the largest number of people. I approached the leaders of each church or ministry with a request that they prepare a three-minute summary of their ministry and the current goals or aims for the future. I spent time preparing for the hospitality and fellowship break, knowing that informal conversations over tea and coffee would provide opportunities for people to engage with each other. I prepared topics for small group discussion and hoped that people would respond. Throughout all my preparations I prayed that the gathering would be an opportunity for people to put aside their differences and suspicions, coming with a willingness to listen and learn from each other as a precursor to working together in ministry and mission.

I hired the community centre for the first evening as a ‘neutral’ space that had good parking and accessibility, as well as kitchen facilities. I knew it would be warm and that it would be possible to rearrange chairs into small groups, although I was unsure how many people would attend. A few people arrived early, offering to help set-up, which was a relief as I was flustered by the practical arrangements and the amount of pressure I felt as the primary leader and organiser. There was a pleasant buzz of conversation as people arrived and I bustled around trying to get things ready. I was hopeful, but also painfully aware that people can be unpredictable and messy.

I began by introducing myself and my aims for the evening, stressing my commitment to facilitating conversation between different churches and groups. As I spoke about unity and diversity, I read 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, affirming the importance of different traditions and expressions of Christian faith. As I invited participants to join in saying the Lord’s Prayer together, I hoped they would be encouraged by this shared expression of faith. I presented an overview of my fieldwork and additional research experiences as a foundation for highlighting

four areas of reflection and discussion for the evening: *Communication, Compassion, Celebration* and *Collaboration*.

I highlighted *communication* as the primary theme for the evening, making it clear that I believed the future for mission and ministry in the local area depended upon working together. I had been impressed by some of the ministry initiatives in the area but discouraged by the lack of collaboration, exacerbated by a lack of connection. Cooperation required knowing about each other. I invited local representatives to share three-minute summaries as a means of encouraging people to consider what was already happening in the local area.

Unsurprisingly, every person who shared spoke for longer than three minutes. I was eager to let people tell their own story, but it was difficult when they meandered from the point. As one participant observed on the feedback form, '2 ½ minutes should be just that and a clock should be running for people who cannot control themselves.' I was most disappointed in the representative for the parish church who appeared to have misunderstood my request and had, instead, produced a lengthy reflection on the challenges of parish churches and possible opportunities for working in the local community. As I watched the time pass I tried to keep things moving; recognising unmistakable signs of impatience in the fidgeting or resigned looks and private lip twitches or raised eyebrows of people listening to one person or another justifying their position.

A break for tea and coffee allowed people to stand and move around after sitting through an hour of talking. I intentionally encouraged people to speak to someone who did not attend their church and was pleased by their response. Despite being a small group from a relatively limited area there were people who had never spoken to each other, but they were happy to introduce themselves over tea and coffee.

The second half of the evening illustrated the potential for ecumenical gatherings, while emphasising the need for time and further discussion. I had been clear from the beginning that I intended to wrap up the evening by 9:15pm and felt it was important to keep my word, but the first half and the break had taken longer than I'd anticipated. Rather than moving into small group discussion, I asked for responses within the large group setting. Fortunately,

there were only 22 attendees, so a good range of people could share their thoughts.

I began the group discussion by reflecting on the need for *compassion*, acknowledging the difficulties and pain experienced by churches and individuals in the local community. In discussion, people shared the same things from different church perspectives. Participants highlighted the challenge of having compassion for people they did not know. This applied to other churches or ministries and to people in the community. One participant talked about compassion in times of bereavement and being unsure how to respond without trying to 'fix' the issue. Others talked about the struggle associated with having 'the same five people doing everything and getting burnt out.' They affirmed my assessment of communication as a primary challenge for everyone in churches and into the community. They also expressed their concern over a lack of confidence and bible knowledge among church members, making it difficult to engage in evangelism.

Having begun with compassion, I guided the conversation into reflecting on *celebration*, noting how easy it is to focus on negative things and miss celebrating the positive aspects or milestones. After a long pause, one brave person expressed [their] appreciation for tea and coffee before services in the parish church. Another joined in with a laugh, saying, 'We can forget that being small is a blessing because it means we can get to know each other and our neighbours.' A member of Northfield Evangelical church agreed before remarking that not having a minister might be a blessing because 'we have opportunities to try things and think about how we can all contribute.'³⁸³ Someone else commended the pastoral work of the community café, while another expressed their thankfulness for the work of the Christian Youth Trust and Scripture Union. I found participants were much quieter for this discussion, reinforcing my theory that there was a cultural reticence about acknowledging success. People appeared to find it difficult to identify things to celebrate because they regularly focused on the challenges or limitations.

³⁸³ At the time of the first Joint Churches Gathering, there was no minister at Northfield Evangelical church or for the parish church with its linked charges.

The final discussion of the evening involved ideas for the future as we focused on opportunities for *collaboration*. Again, communication was referenced as participants talked about the need for a joint calendar across churches. This led to thoughts about joint events, recognising that the local churches were small with limited resources. As one participant said, ‘Not every church has all the gifts, but if we get to know each other and share our gifts we can support each other for the glory of God in this area.’³⁸⁴

The discussion grew more animated as people began sharing about existing initiatives or volunteer opportunities. I advised them to consider one or two things that might be done well. As people talked with each other about the possibilities for a prayer network, they realised that it was something that might be shared. People had little connection with each other, but we could make a contact list and work on building relationships between churches. As one participant said earlier in the evening, ‘We have a lot to share, but I guess we just don’t know each other very well.’

I closed the evening with a reminder about the importance of unity and invited participants to stand together in a circle and speak the Grace to each other as an expression of fellowship. There were a couple of raised eyebrows and several emphatic nods at my suggestion. People stood and moved into position with a shuffling of feet and chairs. As we spoke the words together, I looked around the circle and saw smiles.

*Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.*

Although the formal part of the meeting had ended, people helped with putting chairs away and generally tidying up the community centre. Some scattered conversations continued and I breathed a sigh of relief that the evening had been a success in so far as it brought people together for discussion and

³⁸⁴ Cf. Elizabeth Clark, ‘An Effective Christian Presence’, *Rural Theology* 14, no. 2, (September 2016), pp. 102–11.

reflection. Despite the limitations on time, I was encouraged by the level of participation among those who attended.

6.2.2 General Gatherings

Following the initial gathering in Braedubh, I continued to host a gathering each quarter, trying to arrange times that were not in conflict with church or community events. Each gathering included a combination of fellowship time, sharing refreshments, presentations and discussion. Individuals brought food contributions and helped with set up and tear down. My goal for these gatherings was facilitating relationships and reflecting on the calling of Christian groups in the local area to work together in mission and ministry. In each of the gatherings I asked people to reflect on different aspects of mission and ministry, challenging them to consider opportunities in their own contexts. Each topic reflected an aspect of my research and the patterns I began noticing in conversations with church people and non-church people. Following on from the first night I realised it would be important to consider the basics, discussing concepts of mission and ministry as a foundation for any practical applications. I asked people to consider their understanding of the kingdom of God, the goal or purpose of 'church', 'mission' and 'ministry.' I facilitated conversations about dreams and asked participants to think about their skills and abilities.

Each evening consisted of a predictable pattern of prayer, a presentation or reflection, group discussion and informal fellowship time. I regularly began the formal part of the evening with a prayer and reflection or reading, either leading it myself or inviting contributions from different church groups. I prepared questions for group discussion and reflection, encouraging people to sit with members of another church group and take the time to listen to other perspectives. Each question or thought provided the basis for further discussion in small groups before feeding back to the larger group, sharing perspectives and thoughts for further reflection.

A break in the middle of the evening encouraged people to move around, continue conversations and have a cup of tea or coffee. I encouraged people to change groups at this point, unless there was a particular element of discussion they wanted to continue in their small group. In doing so, I aimed to provide

opportunities for people to develop or strengthen connections with each other, bridging gaps between different church groups. In some cases this allowed people to continue conversations or begin new conversations based on the small group work.

The end of every evening involved a time of prayer for each other. If people were willing and time allowed, I invited people to join in, but this was something I assessed based on the participants. I would regularly ask for representatives from different ministries to pray, acknowledging the diversity of traditions and expressions of church. Sometimes people would leave quickly after the closing prayer, particularly if the weather was poor, but it was more common to have people volunteer to help tidy up while they continued to talk with each other.

6.2.3 Attendance & Interest

I prioritised personal connections when it came to publicising the Joint Church gatherings. I had spent months developing relationships with individuals, earning their trust and establishing lines of communication. This made it easier to invite them to attend and participate in discussion. While I circulated information about the gatherings through newsletters, intimations and emails, I found that personal invitations were the most effective method of involving people and clearly communicating the upcoming event.

I found attendance varied widely from evening to evening depending on factors such as weather, location and timing. Two evenings were particularly stormy with poor visibility, widespread flooding and falling trees, preventing people from traveling on rural roads. Many church members were also active in local events, clubs, sports or choirs, making it difficult to find workable evenings that would allow for broad participation, so I intentionally tried different evenings in discussion with possible participants to minimise conflicts with prior commitments. I found people were willing to attend an event held in their immediate locality but were less likely to attend if it were 'inconvenient' in some way, either because of timing or requirements to travel.

There were times when I was discouraged by poor attendance, while accepting the reality that people were busy. Despite my best intentions, the Joint Churches gathering remained a small event with little evidence of cumulative numeric growth, although those who attended were engaged and developed stronger ties with each other as they reflected together on aspects of mission and ministry. It was common to have between 12 and 25 participants for each evening, often representing a different selection of people each time with some regular attenders.

Those who attended would regularly express their appreciation and often spoke of the event to others, but that was rarely a guarantee that they would attend the following event. While they enjoyed the opportunity to gather and reflect, a 'joint churches' meeting was not a priority in comparison with family or community commitments. I regularly received messages of apology from those who were unable to attend for one reason or another. Such messages were an indication of their interest and desire to support me and the community, but they did not change the reality that it was difficult to build relationships between people who were not present.

6.2.4 Belonging Together

Among those who did attend, I found expressions of openness and care towards one another. Participants arrived early to help set up and greeted each other with warmth. Conversations developed naturally before the session started, often continuing through the evening and beyond. Different households invited others to share meals in their homes or go on walks. I witnessed friendships begin as they discussed opportunities to minister together in the area. By building relationships with each other, they contributed to the social capital of Braedubh and found a sense of belonging together in community.³⁸⁵

On one memorable occasion I asked participants to reflect on places where God was already at work in the local context, referencing the idea of *missio Dei*. A member of the parish church spoke of their appreciation for the Fresh Expression in their village, recognising that God was working in the gathering among people

³⁸⁵ Cf. Bell, Hopkinson and Willmott, 'Reading the Context', pp. 11-16; Walker, *God's Belongers*, pp. 29-43.

who had no interest in the parish church. The leader was visibly moved by the comment, marked by a quick intake of breath and blinking rapidly as though that might stop the tears welling up in [their] eyes. Hearing words of affirmation from this individual was unexpected. As the discussion continued and I asked people to respond to the list we had created. The leader thanked the church member, remarking that it felt good to be accepted and encouraged when [they] had often felt resentment and resistance.

6.2.5 Reflections and Considerations

These types of interactions demonstrated the value in continuing to host Joint Church meetings. My original goal of bridging gaps between churches and facilitating communication so that people would build relationships beyond the boundaries of their church group had been partially fulfilled. I hoped reflecting on the foundations and purposes of mission and ministry would foster discussions that could turn into actions that suited the local context. Braedubh parish church and the other churches in the immediate area were demonstrating signs of fatigue as they duplicated work or tried to develop new things independently rather than pooling their resources. By the end of my fieldwork, there were more conversations happening between churches and ministry leaders about opportunities for mutual support, helped by meeting together; however, I was unconvinced that the initiative of regular ecumenical gatherings would continue in my absence.

My experience with the Joint Churches gathering was indicative of the experience of a minister in a rural church. As I reflected on the experience, I identified areas of difficulty in the initiative. It was highly dependent upon me as the initiator and facilitator. It was directly related to my research and, as a result, I felt pressure to be the sole organiser and planner of each meeting. My ability to communicate with a wide range of people in the churches and villages was hampered by my limited role and presence in each of the representative groups. Written notices were less effective than personal invitations and it was impossible to arrange a date and time that was suitable for everyone. I struggled with the lack of interest or investment I found among people who were unwilling to attend, making it difficult to appreciate the small blessings and benefits.

Small rural churches such as Braedubh and Riverglebe require high levels of personal investment which can be exhausting.³⁸⁶ I was disappointed with the response to the gatherings because I was convinced that ecumenical relationships would provide a useful foundation for mission and ministry in Braedubh and the surrounding area. My expectations and hopes were based on my aspirational goals and reflections rather than the limited training or knowledge of my participants. Each meeting reminded me that I had a different frame of reference and background and needed to meet people where they were and walk alongside them in a journey of reflection and learning as they explored new concepts around mission and ministry.

6.3 Bible Studies – Trial and Error

My time with Braedubh and Riverglebe raised many questions concerning the priority of faith and even the familiarity with the Bible and tenets of faith. As I spoke with people I discovered a range of personal practices and beliefs. I was intrigued by the elder who stated that [they] 'did not believe in God' but felt that it was [their] duty to visit people regularly and invite people to come along to church.³⁸⁷ One individual spoke at length with me about the need for more people to read their Bibles and pray regularly. [They] had been concerned about the lack of challenge and commitment to personal faith in the church and felt that the only way forward was for individuals to take responsibility for their own growth and maturity.³⁸⁸

When I commented on my observation that there appeared to be little biblical literacy within the churches I was greeted with a combination of blank stares, vigorous nods, raised eyebrows, eyerolls, sighs and the occasional question. A suggestion that perhaps a Bible study or house group might be appropriate as a way of increasing familiarity with the Bible brought up stories of previous experiences, and mixed responses in terms of interest. One group of people indicated their disdain for a Bible study because 'it's only ever the same people, no one else would come.' Others explained to me that Bible studies under the

³⁸⁶ Cf. Rutledge, 'Burnout', pp. 59-65.

³⁸⁷ Cf. Belonging through activities in Walker, *God's Belongers*, pp. 29-35.

³⁸⁸ Cf. *Owned faith* in Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, pp. 98-99.

oversight of the previous minister were merely a ‘bunch of gossiping busybodies’ and a place where the minister aired [their] opinions while everyone nodded along. Members of the group who attended those Bible studies reminisced about the ‘nice small group’ where they ‘really got to know each other’ over ‘plenty of tea and cake.’ Several individuals indicated their interest in such a group, but it was impossible to fix a time that would suit everyone. For some people, the introduction of a new ‘regular activity’ had the potential to impact their ability to belong to other groups and regular meetings. They already felt a sense of belonging to the church through regular Sunday services and relationships and did not feel a need for a Bible study.³⁸⁹

On reflection, I felt the challenge for discussions of Bible studies, or small groups, or similar meetings was one of purpose. There was little consensus on the purpose or goal of a Bible study. For some, it was seen as an opportunity to invite new people, and therefore should be scheduled at a time of day that might be appealing to parents of young children. Others felt that a morning or early afternoon study in someone’s house would be more accessible and more comfortable than something in an evening. Many of the conversations discussed the idea of a study as ‘a good thing to do’ without resulting in a plan or a commitment to attend. After one failed attempt at hosting a Bible study I stopped to consider the factors involved.

First, the study was poorly defined. There was a theme for discussion and a suggested psalm to read ahead of time, but little framework for preparation or navigating expectations of what meeting together might entail. For church members with little knowledge of small group Bible studies this type of approach involved too much uncertainty. A more structured approach, or the use of a study guide with copies available for interested members might have been more successful.

Another factor was communication. There was little definitive communication about the study within the church and virtually no communication with those in the community. Methods of communicating information such as dates, times, topic, purpose and target audience were a characteristic problem which I

³⁸⁹ Cf. Walker, ‘Belonging’, pp. 90-91.

observed throughout much of my fieldwork. Some information was shared during the pre-service intimations (announcements), but it was contingent upon who was opening each Sunday morning. It could also be circulated through the quarterly newsletter, assuming it had been received in time. In Riverglebe it would be printed on the back of service sheets in addition to being announced. The details for certain events or meetings would be circulated by email, relying on the organisers to have access to email addresses and/or church and session members to have access to email, neither of which could be guaranteed. Bigger community-facing events had posters on notice boards or in shop windows. The most effective form of communication was word-of-mouth and personal invitation, but details and information were often missed or reinterpreted in the process. As I split my time between both case study churches I was unable to ensure the information was shared, or influence how it was shared.

Timing was also problematic. A decision had been made about the time and day in an arbitrary fashion, based on community events and schedules with the articulated intention that it might be a time that would appeal to those of retirement age or those with small children. Those who participated in the discussion of the time and place had taken time to consider what might work for 'other people' without considering what they, themselves, might attend. The one individual who was very interested in participating told me later, after the study failed to materialise, that it was scheduled at a time that was difficult for [them] but that [they] had felt uncomfortable about proposing a different time during the discussion because [they] 'did not want to be awkward.' As a result, the individual was unable to attend and the one other church member who arrived stayed only for long enough to have a cup of tea when no one else appeared.

The problem of timing was also impacted by the methods of communication. Although the study was due to run in association with Braedubh, which meets every Sunday, it was common for church members to only attend two or three Sunday services in the month. Some key members could attend as little as once every five or six weeks, and one expressed [their] regret several weeks after the failed attempt when [they] read about it in the quarterly newsletter and asked about attending. If the same study had been attempted in Riverglebe, it would have needed a minimum of six weeks between the first announcement and the

start of the study, to allow for bi-monthly services and members who attend only one service each month.

Despite the conversations, preparation, considerations of timing and accessibility, attempts at communication, and personal interactions with individuals who expressed some form of interest, the Bible study was unsuccessful. Many factors were involved, but apart from the practical elements, there was also the problem of people and local context. In proposing and preparing the study, I had not considered the implications of the local situation and the people involved. Instead of taking the time to articulate and reflect on the purpose of a bible study and discuss it thoroughly with the people who were my 'target' audience in order to gain their insight, I had been influenced by my reading on the benefits of Bible studies and discussion groups.³⁹⁰ I had neglected to consider the groundwork that might be necessary to address the inbuilt cultural reticence to discuss questions of faith in a group setting. Despite my exposure to the people of Braedubh, I had a limited understanding of their response to the idea of a study in someone's home and their comprehension of the purposes of meeting.

Many older members of the church were uncomfortable with the idea of sharing their thoughts and opinions about a particular passage of scripture. These members had attended church throughout their lives, participating in Sunday School and attending classes on church membership when they were young, but their primary interaction with the church over the years prior to my fieldwork was passive, in the shape of attending Sunday services and listening to the minister expound on a particular chapter or verse. One older individual commented that [they] would not know what to say if [they] were asked a question. Instead of a group study or discussion, the majority of people were more interested in the idea of a type of lecture or presentation, followed by discussions on a particular topic. This format was familiar to those who were members of the Guild and therefore comfortable.

³⁹⁰ Most notably Laurie Green's discussion of theology in congregational groups. Green, *Let's Do Theology*, pp. 41–122.

From a practical standpoint, these church members faced challenges in mobility and many no longer had cars. For these members it was difficult to make arrangements to leave their own homes. This was complicated by their regular routines. For several the routine of carers or meal provision prevented their participation, while those who relied on medical attention were often left at the mercy of the time when medical professionals were able to visit, which was contingent upon many external factors. A simplistic solution would be to propose meeting in the home of one or more of these members; however, such a suggestion had the potential to cause undue stress and anxiety on the part of the host. Several expressed their sadness over their limited space, or ability to provide hospitality in the ways in which they had been accustomed in 'days gone by.'

Many of these members longed for fellowship, partly because they were no longer able to regularly attend Sunday services, reinforcing a sense of unbelonging or alienation from the church analogous to David Walker's categorisation of *absent friends*.³⁹¹ Facing isolation and loneliness, they spoke of their limitations and their gratitude for those who took time to visit, even as they expressed their embarrassment over the lack of provision.³⁹² One apologised to me for being unable to give me lunch when an impromptu mid-morning visit extended into the lunch hour. For such individuals a customised study where two or three people drop in for an evening might be appropriate, but such an approach would require time and training for a team of people who could facilitate such studies.

6.4 Clergy as Compere?

As I reflected on my fieldwork and my role as 'Compere' I was struck by parallels with the role and calling of ordained clergy in a rural area. In this section I will highlight different aspects of my experience and how they might relate to the experience of a minister moving into an unfamiliar rural area as an 'incomer'. My experience as an outsider entering the local area and establishing workable relationship with individuals and groups was influenced by my background and by

³⁹¹ Walker, 'Belonging', pp. 87-88.

³⁹² Cf. Arthur Rank Centre, 'Rural Isolation and Loneliness', pp. 2-7.

my localised interest in the church, but it was also a process. It involved observing and listening, which, in turn, influenced my ability to speak. As I found my footing and spent time with people, I found occasions to use my particular talents in serving the local church and community. I operated as a team member, walking alongside people to encourage them and communicate their efforts to a broader group. My role as a facilitator and initiator was thoroughly grounded in the context and my established relationships, responding to the opportunities and needs of the local area, even when they did not conform to my plans.

6.4.1 Perils and Privileges of ‘Incoming’

When I first moved to Scotland in 2009 I was introduced to the term ‘incomer’. It is an evocative way of referring to people who are not ‘from here’ but who have chosen to live in a particular place. It carries similar connotations as the term ‘outsider’ and yet it marks those who make an effort to be involved in local events or activities. It serves as a reminder that they do not really belong, and yet they have a place in the community. As I spent more time living in different Scottish towns and villages I learned that there is subtle nuance to the way in which ‘incomer’ is used to describe people. Although I have heard it used indulgently, as a way of excusing a newcomer’s ignorance or bumbling attempts to join in with local customs, it is often derogatory, referring to someone who moves into a place and tries to take over, imposing their will and ideas on local people or groups and demonstrating a lack of respect for local Scottish culture or traditions.³⁹³ It is usually used to describe someone who is English, although it can refer to other nationalities.

Many clergy are ‘incomers’ when they first arrive in the local parish. H. M. B. Reid noted the phenomenon in 1908 and it has not substantially changed in the intervening years.³⁹⁴ There is a temptation for many to begin implementing their ideas and plans as soon as they arrive, often unconsciously alienating local people because of their ignorance of the context and relationships or the

³⁹³ Jędreg and Nuttall, *White Settlers*, pp. 3-7.

³⁹⁴ Reid, *A Country Parish*, pp. 10–11.

importance of ‘place’ for members of the congregation.³⁹⁵ Rural mission and ministry initiatives are driven and sustained by local people so it is essential to invest in building trust and discovering the underlying history, culture and relational networks of a local area. It takes time and cannot be rushed. Those who come from a different region or church background should be cautious and exercise humility when they first arrive, remembering their first priority should be to understand the nature of the congregation before trying to change it.³⁹⁶ As I discovered in both Braedubh and Riverglebe, many people already had ideas and opinions about what churches should or should not be and what might or might not work. Their stories are part of the overarching narrative identity of the congregation which has a direct impact on the possibilities for the future and how the church may respond to change.³⁹⁷

When I first arrived in Braedubh I was aware of the likelihood that I would be seen as this type of incomer. I was conscious of being an outsider, both to the area and to the Church of Scotland. I knew the possibility that I could easily be cast in the role of ‘interfering busybody’ as I asked questions and began getting involved with local people and events. I met with kirk sessions and congregational boards to explain that I had no intention of ‘taking over’ or ‘fixing’ the local church, I was simply a researcher looking to participate and actively support the church and community.³⁹⁸ I invited their participation and feedback, explaining that I would be reflecting on the situation in the churches and trying to understand the local context through stories and relationships.³⁹⁹

6.4.2 Observing, Listening & Communicating

I made the transition from ‘incomer’ to ‘one of us’ over a period of eighteen months where I actively observed and listened. These two aspects of my research approach supported my inclusion in the local area as I looked for opportunities to spend time *with* people through day-to-day life, building

³⁹⁵ Cf. Walker, *God’s Belongers*, pp. 57-62.

³⁹⁶ Cf. Hopewell, *Congregation*, p. 11.

³⁹⁷ Cf. Hopewell, *Congregation*, pp. 103-18.

³⁹⁸ This was, of course, an oversimplification of my role and involvement.

³⁹⁹ Cf. Bell, Hopkinson and Willmott, ‘Reading the Context’, pp. 1-30; Hopewell, *Congregation*, pp. 1-18.

relationships with local people and participating in activities and events.⁴⁰⁰ It became a significant element of my active role as I took what I saw and heard and communicated it to others. I acted as the Gala Day Compere in response to an articulated need for someone to take the public role of watching, listening and vocalising what was happening to encourage participation as a facilitator for the gala.

One of the common complaints I heard from church and community members in Riverglebe and Braedubh was that ministers did not listen or communicate well. I was not burdened by the additional responsibilities of preparing for weekly services or pastoral care needs during my fieldwork, but I questioned whether ministers might benefit from considering their role as observers, listeners and communicator/facilitators. I suggest observation and listening should be prioritised in all aspects of parish ministry, especially where clergy are responsible for pastoral care and navigating expectations from multiple churches, alongside working with local community councils and presbyteries. Taking time to listen well, investing in local church members and developing teams of people who practice good communication would enable ministers and churches to respond well to the needs of the parish.⁴⁰¹ They would also be able to adapt their preaching or teaching style, ensuring regular services and sermons were accessible and contextually appropriate.⁴⁰²

6.4.3 Team Member

Becoming the compere for Riverglebe was an extension of my role as a member of the committee. I had put in the time and effort during the planning stages, looking for opportunities to serve alongside existing ideas and contribute my skills. I was not responsible for single-handedly planning, preparing and setting up the Gala Day, but I did become the visible embodiment of the committee on the day because I was constantly moving, responding to people where they were and inviting them to participate. Other members of the committee operated

⁴⁰⁰ Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), p. 9.

⁴⁰¹ Cf. Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, pp. 143-56.

⁴⁰² As Leonora Tubbs Tisdale reflected, moving into a rural church required addressing her assumptions and 'exegeting the congregation' in order to ensure her preaching was appropriate for the local context. Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology*, pp. 56–90.

behind the scenes, running children's games, manning tents, serving teas and coffees and participating in competitions. I brought the threads together and presented them to the public, but I was not responsible for making things happen.

If I am correct in arguing that the future of rural mission and ministry requires a team approach, then it follows that the minister should be a member of the team. Within Presbyterian governance this is officially reflected in the kirk session and using the language of 'teaching elder' to describe the position the minister holds among their fellow 'ruling' elders. Clergy in rural areas have a visible and public role that could be used to facilitate communicating between teams and beyond; however, they should not be single-handedly responsible for carrying out the mission and ministry of the church.⁴⁰³ Such an approach limits the capacity of the church to the abilities of the minister, while simultaneously subjecting the minister to the burden of maintaining existing forms, structures and expectations. If a team approach exists, a minister can act as a coordinator and communicator, maintaining focus on the overall aims and goals while encouraging participation from church members.⁴⁰⁴ As a result, the church can curate a multi-authored narrative of identity and calling which is consistent with their context.⁴⁰⁵

The minister in Riverglebe actively supported the work of Riverglebe Village Events, attending the community choir, cinema nights, the horticultural show and the Gala Day. As an active member of the community, [they were] invited to officiate the tug-of war competition for the Gala Day. Their involvement in the community was understated but visible, creating opportunities for pastoral care and informal conversations. As a result, people were open to the minister's offer of prayer for a local family during a choir practice when we heard the news of a tragic bereavement. The minister had no personal agenda or goal to 'evangelise' or 'mission' the people in the community to get them to attend church. Instead, [they] were focused on supporting local initiatives and building

⁴⁰³ Malcolm Grundy, among others, advocates a combination of oversight and team ministry. Grundy, *Multi-Congregation Ministry*, pp. 74-104.

⁴⁰⁴ Elford, *Creating the Future*, pp. pp. 46-57.

⁴⁰⁵ Cf. The example of Natural Church Development (NCD) in Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, pp. 150-79.

relationships, *being with* the people where they were.⁴⁰⁶ Arguably, this approach may have had limited effect in quantitative numbers for church growth, but it demonstrated the minister's willingness to prioritise the needs of the local community as a 'team' member rather than a 'leader'.

6.4.4 Facilitator/Trainer

Encouraging participation is one aspect of facilitation. When I served as compere, my primary goal was ensuring people were given opportunities to be involved, regardless of age, interests and activities. I represented a range of options and activities, reflecting the timeline of events but allowing people to make their own choices about levels of participation. I wanted to see evidence of engagement, but I had no vested interest in promoting one group or activity more than another activity.

Ministers who act as facilitators in a ministry setting have the potential to see initiatives grow around them in response to the needs of the local context and the interests or skills of the people involved. Rather than directing the specific goals and outcomes of a particular ministry, a minister who is called to facilitating participation encourages people to contribute their ideas and provides the appropriate support for them to develop and implement those ideas.⁴⁰⁷ Working alongside the Riverglebe Gala committee gave me first-hand experience of collaborative innovation with a 'leader' who presented a big-picture goal and released individuals to be creative.

The training aspect of the 'compere' stage of my research was, in many respects, an extension of facilitation. At each of the Joint Churches gatherings I presented possibilities and asked questions, inviting people to respond. With each successive venture or meeting I built on the previous discussion, highlighting areas of difficulty or ignorance and directing the conversation by means of questions or reflections. Rather than presenting a definitive answer, I encouraged people to engage with a process of discovery as they explored options for approaching their own context.⁴⁰⁸ I contributed my perspective when

⁴⁰⁶ Well, *Incarnational Ministry*, pp. 14-23.

⁴⁰⁷ Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, pp. 23-40.

⁴⁰⁸ Wells, *Incarnational Ministry*, p. 9.

asked directly, but I wanted to stimulate growth and development that might be continued after I left the field.

In my view, this type of approach should be implemented by ministers in parish settings. As highlighted by researchers and scholars such as Doug Gay, the role of ministers in the Church of Scotland needs to be addressed as more stipendiary clergy retire and more linked charges are created.⁴⁰⁹ In order for small parish churches in rural areas to continue serving the local area in mission and ministry, the 'laity' needs to be involved, but as I discovered in Braedubh and Riverglebe, there has been a lack of opportunity and training. As I discovered through the Gala Day, Riverglebe Village Events and the Joint Churches gathering, both churches have members who are willing to be involved in new initiatives when they understand the purpose and have a goal. A minister in these churches who prioritised observing, listening and communicating could begin changing the trajectory of both churches by investing in training and developing innovative teams with a focus on mission and ministry.

6.4.5 Letting Go

The final aspect of my experience of the compere's role which corresponds with the role of the clergy in rural areas is that of letting go. When I began my research I had specific ideas about what I might be able to accomplish. As I invested in the local context I was forced to reassess my assumptions. With each initiative or opportunity I found myself constantly revising my plans to accommodate the complexity of the situation. Some things were unsuccessful because I failed to recognise the order of priority and address the local context to establish a foundation for my ideas.

The Riverglebe Gala Day was a clear example of needing to let go of my agenda in order to respond to the needs of the moment. I had planned to carry out a survey of the local community and their views on the parish church, providing me with concrete qualitative written responses from a range of participants. I was going to base myself at a tent on the side of the green and ask people to come and draw pictures, write words on a whiteboard and answer some open-

⁴⁰⁹ Gay, *Reforming the Kirk*, pp. 42–43.

ended questions. Instead, I was given the opportunity to engage in the embodied experience of being the compere, stimulating my conceptions of my research and giving me the opportunity to reflect on possibilities for the role of the minister and church in the local area.

If I had failed to respond to the request or been blind to the need of the moment, I would have collected valuable data, but I would have missed the richness of the experience. As a result, my understanding and access to the local area would have been different. I have no way of comparatively assessing how rejecting the opportunity might have impacted the success of the Gala Day, but the response from the community and the committee was definitive: my contribution as compere was an integral part of the day, to the extent that I was invited to reprise my role in 2019, despite having left the area when I finished my fieldwork. By sacrificing my personal goals, I was able to learn more about the local community and foster healthy relationships with long term implications. Combining this with the other aspects of my role and research experience, I found opportunities to share in the life of the local context, finding a way of belonging through events, activities and relationships, which materially affected my perception and understanding of the challenges facing people in Riverglebe and Braedubh.

My experience illustrates one of the primary challenges for clergy in parish ministry. Many of the active and retired clergy I met during my fieldwork, both locally and nationally, had particular plans or agendas for their churches and expressed their frustration or disappointment when they were unable to implement their ideas. People in Braedubh offered scathing opinions on previous ministers in both the parish church and Northfield Evangelical church who tried imposing their own agendas and refused to adapt to the local context. This inability or unwillingness to let go undermined their capacity to become part of the church community. In my opinion, they misunderstood the importance of *belonging* in an incarnational sense, as a key aspect in rural mission and ministry.⁴¹⁰

⁴¹⁰ Cf. Billings, *Lost Church*, pp. 124-28; Walker, *God's Belongers*, pp. 92-104.

6.5 Summary: 'Belonging'

As I discovered during the second phase of my fieldwork, *belonging* was essential for being able to contribute to shaping an appropriate response to the local context in rural areas. I identified myself as part of the local churches, Braedubh community café and Riverglebe village as I participated in events and activities, building relationships with people. My approach to Braedubh and Riverglebe gave me an opportunity to build relationships as I literally and metaphorically 'joined the choir', but the transition to becoming *compere* was both a sign of belonging and a declaration of trust. People *knew* me because I spent time investing in *their* projects and ideas. Rather than *taking* control, I was *given* opportunities to lead and referred to as 'one of us' by villagers and church members.

As I participated in preparing and facilitating the new Riverglebe Gala Day, I was reminded of the importance of death and rebirth. The village was able to take time to consider their priorities and the purpose of a joint community event like the Gala. They recognised that times had changed, and rather than attempt to resuscitate the old ways, they made space to adapt and base the new Gala Day on the context and the people involved. This lesson should be applied in many churches across Scotland if they are going to be sustainable.

My involvement with the Braedubh Joint Churches gathering reminded me of the importance of communication and collaboration. Churches should be prepared to work together. Rural mission and ministry should not be limited to any one particular church. Divisions within the Body of Christ undermine our capacity to witness to love and reconciliation. In rural areas where churches live alongside each other, a united approach to mission and ministry can be supported well if churches are willing to share resources and skills for the glory of God.

My experiences with Bible studies in Braedubh was discouraging but did not substantially change my underlying conviction that rural parish churches are suffering from a lack of training and discipleship. Instead, it affirmed the necessity of developing contextually appropriate approaches to discipleship and adult Christian education in rural areas. Applying the lessons I learned during

my fieldwork, trainers or facilitators must begin from a place of belonging and humility, laying aside their preconceptions and building relationships.

Clergy entering small rural churches should be prepared to spend a season as an incomer, learning to listen well to the people who live in their parishes. I suggest they should prioritise walking alongside people and building relationships before trying to blindly implement change. Many rural churches and places are going through times of transition and change that could be assisted or facilitated by clergy who are willing let go of their plans and embrace the contextual opportunities for mission and ministry that emerge as they spend time with people.

In the next chapter I will dig further into the dilemma facing rural parish churches in light of their present realities. Will they let go of 'aye been' to embrace what 'could be'? What are they willing to prioritise? How could they develop creative, sustainable approaches to rural mission and ministry?

Chapter 7 Reflexive Storytelling: From ‘Aye Been’ to ‘Could Be’

I am constantly amazed how effective it is to re-tell the story of my research and my experiences with these churches. Today I presented a summary to Braedubh where I reviewed the different things I’ve been involved with over the past 2 years. Many of them had been forgotten.

I was disappointed at the low numbers who attended, but those who were there were engaged. As they listened, they looked at each other and laughed together over some of the ups and downs. I saw wry smiles playing around the lips of those who recognised themselves or others in the stories I shared. Several remarked that it had been a busy two years. They had not realised how much had changed within their church, especially around introducing tea and coffee.

They focused on each week as it came with little sense of where that week fit in the big picture of church development. The concerns of today or this week overshadowed past accomplishments and made planning for the future seem impossible and uncertain.

*By re-telling their story and the story of my involvement with the church I was able to illustrate the challenges and opportunities in ways that were immediately relatable. Using our shared experience gave them time to stop and remember. I wasn’t just talking about abstract concepts or ideas.
It was their story.
Their lives.
Their church.*

As I neared the end of my fieldwork I took time to reflect on my shared journey with Braedubh and Riverglebe. I had started as a naïve incomer, building relationships with people and trying to find my place in the *choir* of the local context. As the months progressed I gradually made the transition from incomer to *compere* as an active contributor in Braedubh and Riverglebe. Along the way I gathered evidence about the sustainability and possible future for rural mission and ministry.

In this chapter I record the next phase of my research, reporting to the churches and Crossbrae Presbytery with my findings and recommendations for the future. I told stories of my experiences, reframing them with questions about the past,

present and future. As I summarised my research and my reflections, I invited people to consider the future for *their* church and *their* village. My research focused on the lived reality of both churches, making it contextual and immediately relevant.

In my research, and my reports, I stressed the importance of change. I adapted a local phrase to argue that ‘aye been’ must become ‘could be’ or it would be merely ‘has been’. In this chapter I include stories of Ellieneuk, a neighbouring parish, and Freshfield, a pioneer ministry within the presbytery, as examples of contextual revitalisation and growth. While the current state of mission and ministry in Braedubh and Riverglebe is unsustainable, I argue that there is *potential* for a sustainable and creative future for mission and ministry in rural areas.

7.1 Storytelling as Research

As a direct extension from my role as compere, I engaged in re-telling, or re-storying, my experiences while inviting responses from participants and encouraging engagement with discussions of the future.⁴¹¹ The use of stories in ethnographic or anthropological research is well-documented.⁴¹² Stories are pedagogical tools, as well as a means for establishing or maintaining relationships and communities, enabling people to ‘navigate the tangled web of human experience.’⁴¹³ From my position as a researcher I took opportunities to evocatively reframe the stories of the churches, recognising the complexity and improvisational nature of divergent stories which contributed to my understanding of local mission and ministry.⁴¹⁴ Comparing the stories of these churches with stories from the Bible, tradition and neighbouring parishes offered

⁴¹¹ Hopewell, *Congregations*, pp. 140–49; Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, pp. 214–36.

⁴¹² Celina Carter et al., ‘Explicating Positionality: A Journey of Dialogical and Reflexive Storytelling’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 13, no. 1, (1 February 2014), pp. 362–76; Yvette Taylor, ‘Stories to Tell? Reflexive (Dis)Engagements and (De)Legitimized Selves’, *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 8, (1 October 2010), pp. 633–41; Paul Lichterman, ‘Interpretive Reflexivity in Ethnography’, *Ethnography* 18, no. 1, (1 March 2017), pp. 35–45.

⁴¹³ Jo A. Tyler and Faith Mullen, ‘Telling Tales in School: Storytelling for Self-Reflection and Pedagogical Improvement in Clinical Legal Education’, *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2011, at p. 283.

⁴¹⁴ Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, pp. 125–49.

parallels for dialogue and insight into the local story. I based my recommendations in the priorities of the local situation, influenced by this reflexive analysis.⁴¹⁵ I encouraged participants to consider their own perspectives and limitations within the overarching narrative and history of the local context. I facilitated opportunities for participants to reflect on questions about mission and ministry as they considered these stories, encouraging them to recognise theological implications, applications and possibilities for the future.⁴¹⁶

Through the process of review, reflection and examination, my understanding and interpretation of my observations and experiences developed more nuance. This, in turn, enabled me to prepare reports for individual churches and the local presbytery which were contextually appropriate and grounded in the embodied and examined experience of my fieldwork. Those who received my reports recognised themselves and responded to key elements which provided a new or alternate perspective on the state of local church mission and ministry.

7.2 Reports & Presentations

During my research I engaged in a regular pattern of reporting to church boards, kirk sessions and Crossbrae Presbytery, as well as general congregational meetings. My initial presentations began the process of dialogue by establishing the basis of my research and acting as an introduction to me as a person and researcher. As time progressed I became more intentional about including my thoughts, observations and reflections on Braedubh and Riverglebe. My reports changed through the duration of my fieldwork, in response to the local context.

My reports to the board and session for both churches were planned as updates on my research. My presentations at presbytery conferences or planning meetings gave me a platform for articulating my research findings and recommendations. In each case I had a specific timeslot during prearranged meetings and had a captive audience of people. Additional presentations for each church were designed for congregational participation and attendance

⁴¹⁵ Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, pp. 172–88.

⁴¹⁶ Hopewell, *Congregation*, pp. 193–202; Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, pp. 180–201.

reflected the challenges I faced in much of my fieldwork. Finding a time and place, arranging notification and communication about the time, date and location within the constraints of irregular church attendance and complex calendars proved difficult. Some attended while others sent apologies and excuses. I found it discouraging to prepare for 25 and have 10 appear but recognised that my experience mirrored that of ministers implementing new ideas.

In addition to formal presentations, I had numerous informal conversations with participants over the course of my fieldwork where I engaged in a process of reframing and retelling the story of both churches, reflecting on both specific and general experiences. These conversations felt more natural, less constrained by the challenges of arranging times and places that might suit the widest selection of people. People felt free to respond to my findings and share their perspectives without the pressure of group settings. Throughout my fieldwork the ongoing dialogue of shared stories and reflections gave me insights and developed my understanding of the local context and the subtext of interpersonal relationships, emotions and perceptions.

The most significant reports to Crossbrae Presbytery and the churches took place at the end of my fieldwork. I re-told the story of my involvement with Braedubh, inviting people to reflect on the journey of the church during their season of transition with a new minister. I delivered a morning session for the linked charges associated with Riverglebe, announced at the previous board and session meeting, where I addressed the need for succession planning and training in anticipation of their minister's retirement. I presented a report on my research at the Crossbrae Presbytery conference day in February 2019 where I used the opportunity to articulate my assessment of the challenges and opportunities facing mission and ministry with specific recommendations for the churches and presbytery at large. Finally, in October 2019, I presented my final report as the key speaker for their meeting on presbytery planning.

7.3 Summarising My General Findings

In my reports I addressed the overriding question of my research about a sustainable future for mission and ministry in small parish churches in Scotland.

After twenty-seven months of fieldwork I concluded that the established models and approaches were unsustainable. The familiar patterns relied on dwindling resources, both human and financial, as members ceased to attend regularly due to age or lack of mobility. On several occasions I was approached by individuals who asked if I thought the church would stay open until their funeral.

Treasurers observed that Sunday offerings were small and the largest financial contribution to church funds came from legacies left to the church by individuals following their death. Funds that were held by the churches were rarely released for mission and ministry purposes, often prioritising the financial costs of maintaining the building. Braedubh had limited finances with little anticipation of more. Riverglebe was in a very comfortable financial position due to the proceeds of selling the manse and a large legacy; however, the terms of the legacy were clear that it was for the building and property rather than the work of the church.

Both church buildings were deteriorating and largely inaccessible for those with reduced mobility. The costs of maintaining, heating and insuring the buildings were regular topics of board and kirk session meetings. Exterior lighting was problematic for both churches, impacting the possibilities for evening meetings. Braedubh had a good church hall but it was underutilised. Problems with the roof and leaks made the west gallery unusable and caused difficulties with damp, mould and concerns about electrical wiring. The interior, exterior and access to Braedubh needed significant updating but there was no available money in church funds for the extent of work required. Riverglebe also required work to make it fit for purpose by providing toilet facilities and a servery. Despite available funds, delays with council, planning permission, utilities and tendering for work meant the process had not progressed beyond discussion of possible plans during the period of my fieldwork. The church's raised position in an historic graveyard meant excavation of the path to facilitate disabled access would not be possible, further limiting its potential as a community space.

During my fieldwork I found a dependency upon ordained clergy, stipendiary or retired, for all aspects of mission and ministry. Prior to the arrival of the new minister in Braedubh several church members commented on their anticipation of a minister who would change things. My suggestion that the time of transition could be productive rather than static was greeted with resignation and

reluctance. Suggestions from church members about change or development, such as the creation of a pastoral care team, were not implemented because the local culture of the church expected such initiatives to be led and organised by the minister. Those who offered their perspectives and abilities were discouraged and frustrated by the lack of engagement among the elders and congregation. Individuals in Riverglebe who suggested new initiatives focused on social or community events with little association with church life and worship apart from using the building. I witnessed and participated in new initiatives with significant social benefits, but they were not designed to be evangelistic or concerned with faith development.

I found a common theme of isolation among church members who felt their church was neglected and lacking support from the presbytery or the national church, represented by 121 George Street. I found churches who were focused on themselves and the immediate challenges of the present, often to the exclusion of considering the wider community, other churches and planning for the future. I regularly heard people talking about the past days of the church, often tinged with a sense of despair or resignation that the time had passed and the church was no longer the same. This inward and backward perspective created difficulties for constructive conversations about the future. People were quick to tell me about the challenges, barriers and obstacles, but struggled to see potential opportunities. When they did speak about dreams or ideas, they were often discussed with the same attitude as I might talk about winning an Olympic medal: a glorious dream with no hope or realistic expectation.

The position of both churches during my fieldwork was precarious and unsustainable. As I looked at my case study churches and the perspectives of many church and community members, I saw a combination of resignation, apathy, despair, exhaustion and desperation. Attempting to continue the existing patterns and traditions without implementing change would lead to the closure of my two case study churches within a decade. However, my fieldwork also gave me insight into potential opportunities for change.

A realistic awareness of the challenges undergirds my argument that there is potential for a creative and sustainable future for mission and ministry in rural Scottish churches. Each challenge can be addressed in practical and prayerful

ways, drawing on the wisdom of others and working together to implement change. The patterns of passivity, apathy and fear of change would need to be replaced by participation, enthusiasm and hope, reflecting theologically on the *missio Dei* and the purpose of parish churches as embodied representations of the work of God in the world.⁴¹⁷

To continue my earlier analogy, a dream of winning an Olympic medal will remain impossibly unattainable without drastic change. I would need to be realistic about choosing my sport, recognising the majority of Olympic athletes retire by their mid-thirties. The oldest Olympic medallists on record competed in shooting or equestrian sports. If I were to fully commit to pursuing an Olympic dream, I would need to prioritise one of these and then devote myself to pursuing excellence. I already have a love of horses and learned how to ride when I was a teenager. It would therefore be logical for me to choose equestrian sports. I would need to find a coach or mentor, a training facility and a good horse. I would need to eat, sleep, breathe and train for the next several years, sacrificing everything that did not contribute to my goal. Along the way there would be smaller goals and points of evaluation in the form of competitions and qualifiers. I would need to make the selection for the team and continue to train throughout. It might take years, or even decades to achieve the final goal of competing in the Olympics but each step would lead me closer.

The choice facing churches in Scotland requires a similar commitment. The New Testament uses athletic imagery and language repeatedly to exhort believers to pursue Christ and remain faithful to their calling as witnesses to the gospel.⁴¹⁸ Small parish churches have an opportunity to implement change at a local level that reflects their context, enabling them to pursue these goals as they engage in mission and ministry. There are obstacles and challenges facing these churches, but there are also opportunities. The stewardship conference held in Braedubh used the language of stumbling blocks and stepping stones,

⁴¹⁷ Cf. Billings, *Lost Church*, pp. 124-28; Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, pp. 50-61.

⁴¹⁸ In canonical order, examples include 1 Corinthians 9:24-25, Philippians 3:12-14, 1 Timothy 4:7-8, 2 Timothy 2:5, Hebrews 12:1.

encouraging church members to examine the stumbling blocks and consider ways to use those blocks as stepping stones for building towards the future.

In the following sections I will address specific challenges with recommendations for changes which are both contextual and informed by broader discussions around church revitalisation and renewal. I will begin by addressing challenges related to perception and mindset before turning to discussion of practice. My reasons for this are twofold. First, the underlying beliefs and perceptions held by church members affect their ability to engage with practice. Second, practical, social or programmatic ‘fixes’ that do not address or reflect the presuppositions held by participants are not sustainable.

7.4 Perceptions and Perspectives

My fieldwork highlighted the complexity and messiness of people’s lives and perceptions of church, mission and ministry. Every person who participated in my research had their own story and perspective. Many people had little knowledge or understanding of the goal or purpose of mission and ministry beyond Sunday services. As I spent time building relationships with participants in the churches and communities I paid attention to their spoken and unspoken assumptions and core beliefs. I found anxiety, insecurity, exhaustion, discouragement, fear, frustration, hurt and anger. I also found hope, desire for purpose, caring hearts and dreams or desires for the future with little understanding of how to implement change. The following discussion builds on my initial reflections in Chapter 5, in a further attempt to synthesize and evaluate elements that are interrelated and interdependent in a logical structure.

7.4.1 What are Ministry & Mission?

Throughout my fieldwork I encountered difficulty with concepts or perceptions of ministry and mission. The words themselves created problems among church members who demonstrated little understanding of the purpose or focus of ‘church’. I was bemused and frustrated at the lack of awareness or teaching about the role of the church congregation in bearing witness to Christ in the local community. As I asked questions about Sunday services or mid-week

meetings, I asked people to reflect on what made church different from any other social group or club. I received curious and questioning looks as people asked what I meant. I was forced to conclude that my understanding of the church's role in facilitating discipleship and pursuing the kingdom of God was unfamiliar to many of my participants.

It is my conviction that a sustainable future for mission and ministry among parish churches in Scotland must address this gap in the knowledge and awareness of ordinary church members and attendees. Businesses and organisations that thrive in our current 21st century culture have clear statements about their goals and purposes. Entrepreneurs and business consultants talk about vision and mission statements, recruiting people who support the ethos and direction of their organisation. What is the purpose or mission of the local Church of Scotland in the 21st century? If it is to further the Kingdom of God and make disciples of the people who live in our parishes, then we must first address the reality that many congregants, church members and office bearers do not know or understand what that means.

I started a discussion with the Braedubh Joint Churches gathering, asking participants to reflect on two of Samuel Wells' definitions of ministry and mission:

An act of ministry is any action of a disciple that enables the body to function, flourish and become more faithful.⁴¹⁹

Whereas ministry seeks to know Christ and make Christ known within the body of believers, mission addresses the world.... But mission often describes that world as the kingdom - thus anticipating that it will be the theatre of God's epiphanies, the sphere of the Spirit's work beyond the church....⁴²⁰

The resulting conversation with Braedubh churches raised important questions about the purpose of mission and ministry, highlighting the differences of opinion or understanding between people with different church backgrounds, and emphasizing the limitations of word choice. For those in the parish church,

⁴¹⁹ Wells, *Incarnational Ministry*, p. 17.

⁴²⁰ Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Mission: Being with the World*, (London: Canterbury Press, 2018), p. 17.

‘ministry’ was the job of the minister. ‘Ministry’ had lost its value as a term for the work of the church as a collective group of people. Likewise, concepts of ‘mission’ were associated with international mission organisations operating in Africa, India, China and Latin America. ‘Evangelism’ conjured images of the gatherings of previous generations with tent meetings, traveling evangelists and Billy Graham’s visit to Glasgow in 1955. Even the terms ‘disciple’, ‘body’ and ‘kingdom’ were widely debated as participants from different churches wrestled with concepts of collaborative contextual mission and ministry.

‘Mission’ and ‘ministry’ were jobs for clergy or those who had special training. People did not see their contributions or gifts as ‘ministry,’ nor did they understand their potential for shaping the future and influence of the church at large. When I talked about my role in mission and ministry as an extension of my daily life as a Christian, I was met with incredulity. Conversations about mission and ministry invariably focused on plans and programmes or events that required preparation and discussion.

I found people who were uncomfortable thinking about their skills, abilities and desires in relation to mission and ministry. I introduced an exercise during the presbytery conference day in early 2019 where I asked people to consider their abilities and their passions, taking time to reflect and write their thoughts on sticky notes to post on notice boards in the hall. I was asking them to engage intentionally with the idea that God had equipped the church with people who could shape mission and ministry in response to their local community using the existing pool of skills.⁴²¹ One minister approached me at the end of the session with an observation that the idea of ‘passion’ was something [they] had never associated with serving in the church. [They] had grown up in the Western Isles where ‘passion’ or ‘desire’ was not considered to be holy or acceptable in church.

Viewing mission and ministry as programmatic or an expression of duty rather than reflecting the personalities and gifts of church members has the potential to foster resentment and reduce the effectiveness or sustainability of initiatives.

⁴²¹ Atkins, ‘A Variety of Gifts’, pp. 14–25; Simon Martin, ‘Discipleship, Nurture and Training’, in *Resourcing Rural Ministry: Practical Insights for Mission*, ed. Jill Hopkinson, (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2015), pp. 63–84.

By contrast, although not viewed as a ‘mission’ initiative, the Riverglebe community choir reflected the interests of church and village members, creating a joint sense of purpose and enabling relationships to form. The initial impetus of preparing for a Christmas event developed beyond the dreams of the original organisers. As people became more familiar with the church building and with some church members, natural conversations began happening through the week and choir members attended special services like Remembrance Sunday. Church members encouraged choir members to attend on Sunday mornings to help with singing the hymns and choir members became more invested in the future of the church building. The groundwork was established for further conversations about faith and discipleship as a natural extension of building relationships and experiencing aspects of the life of the church through encounters with the people and place.⁴²²

However, while such events and opportunities may establish the foundations for missional conversations (where a participant speaks openly about the gospel of Jesus Christ and spiritual matters), such conversations are unlikely to occur. Based on my experiences, I attribute this to several interrelated factors: poor understanding of mission, perceptions of ministry roles, lack of confidence and little or no training and mentoring. Each may also be influenced by differences in concepts of Christianity and the Christian faith, as well as a societal shift in the UK towards increased secularism.⁴²³ I am unwilling to offer a definitive answer or programme for addressing these issues as I have discovered that they are complex, contextual, personal and defy simple categorisation. Instead, I intend to reflect on the significance of these elements and their implications for the sustainability and future of mission and ministry in Scotland.

7.4.2 Crisis of Confidence

I begin this discussion by considering the evidence of a lack of confidence among the people I met during my fieldwork. People who were successful and innovative in their chosen fields of work or prior to their retirement expressed a reticence to become involved in church activities. Individuals were unlikely to

⁴²² Cf. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, pp. 91-93.

⁴²³ Billings, *Lost Church*., pp. 71–99; Percy, ‘Many Rooms in My Father’s House’, pp. 3-15; Gay, *Reforming the Kirk*, pp. 17–27; Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain*, pp. 187–94

volunteer for a job or opportunity if they felt unsure or uncomfortable about the potential requirements of involvement. Others were fearful of initiating conversations with other people about faith or the Bible. Elders confessed their ignorance and discomfort in pastoral care situations. Church members appeared apologetic or even ashamed about their church attendance and would actively direct the conversation away from spiritual matters. While there are several possible explanations for each situation, which echo across cultural and historical church contexts, there is also evidence of a widespread crisis of confidence.

Carol Craig's 2003 book *The Scots' Crisis of Confidence* highlights a characteristic lack of confidence evident across Scottish culture.⁴²⁴ Drawing on elements of history, society, government, church and schools, she argues that a systemic undervaluing or devaluing of individuals has fed into the development of a complex inferiority that results in individuals feeling they are never good enough.⁴²⁵ Craig focuses on the impact of this lack of confidence on national culture and identity and offers significant critique of the role of the Presbyterian church in reinforcing insecurities. While her work is insightful, I found elements to be overly influenced by a perceived dichotomy between Scottish and English culture and accompanying mindsets, disregarding shared social or cultural mores.⁴²⁶ There is also a persistent hostility towards Christianity in her work, to the point of dismissing the possibility that Christianity, and Presbyterian churches, could have a positive impact in Scotland.

As I spoke about the crisis of confidence in my reports people vocally agreed, confirming my assessment. Intriguingly, few had reflected that it might be a cultural phenomenon until I mentioned the patterns I had seen in churches. On a local and contextual level, I recognised a lack of confidence in multiple areas, only two of which I will focus on here, but all of which reflect the complexities of individual, relational and cultural identity.

⁴²⁴ Carol Craig, *The Scots' Crisis of Confidence*, (Edinburgh: Big Thinking, 2003), pp. vii–xv.

⁴²⁵ Craig, *Scots' Crisis of Confidence*, pp. 265–89.

⁴²⁶ Craig, *Scots' Crisis of Confidence*, pp. 230–31.

7.4.2.1 Faith and Discipleship

As a theologian I was interested in questions of faith development and knowledge or understanding of Christianity, mission and ministry. I was unprepared for the lack of knowledge and confidence I found among church members and office bearers. I found people who were uncomfortable with conversations about 'spiritual matters.' Several elders expressed their reticence to discuss faith during pastoral visits, partly rooted in fear that they might be asked a question they would not be able to answer. This was increased among church members who felt their lack of knowledge or experience disqualified them from contributing their opinions or support to others. I found this to be equally prevalent among both men and women but found that women in both churches were more likely to engage in conversations about faith development, while men were more likely to focus on practical tasks or social initiatives.

In each case, people were more willing to express their opinions within the context of personal conversations rather than in a group setting. As my fieldwork progressed I became more involved with the lives of participants, spending time in their homes or speaking with them informally on Sunday mornings. People were more willing to share their questions, doubts and insecurities with me as a fellow member as I invested in their lives. I began to understand that much of their insecurity about discussing spiritual matters stemmed from a lack of teaching or understanding about discipleship, ministry and mission.

I will discuss the need for teaching and training more fully in the next two chapters, but it is important to recognise the effect that ignorance and poor or insufficient teaching has on confidence among church members, office bearers and clergy. One participant spoke for many when [they] said that [they] felt unequal to the task of mission and ministry because [they] did not 'know enough' to talk about spiritual things. During a retreat day with a neighbouring parish I was asked how to respond to a variety of pastoral questions about grief, suffering, loss and tragedy. There was an assumption that I would have the answers because I had university degrees in theology and was a child of the manse, raised in churches. I was able to offer some guidance based on my studies and experience, but the most memorable moment was the response I

received when I said it was often better to say, 'I don't know' and simply share the space or experience with people rather than trying to come up with an answer.⁴²⁷ There was a collective sigh as the group realised that I did not have all the answers, despite studying for years. Two participants were ministers who agreed with me, sharing their own experiences of having no answers and simply praying with people.

As a researcher I found my ability to interpret questions of faith development was hampered by a cultural view of faith and spirituality as private. On one hand, people were fearful of expressing their personal convictions or beliefs because of a lack of confidence or understanding. On another hand, people were reserved about discussing their faith journeys because it was not meant to be public or because such expressions might make others uncomfortable. Several participants had never considered articulating their personal beliefs to others. They did not lack confidence in God or their understanding of the Christian faith, but they lacked confidence in their ability to share that with others.

Alongside the institutional failure of the church to train and disciple people, a pervasive narrative of secularisation in society makes it more difficult to navigate conversations about faith. Charles Taylor's widely praised analysis of the growth of secularisation points to the reality that 'faith[...] is one human possibility among others.'⁴²⁸ As Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins note, there has been a societal shift in the UK, and beyond, which has fundamentally changed the way people talk about Christianity in public and private settings.⁴²⁹ It can no longer be assumed that Christianity, or any form of religious affiliation, is going to be considered credible by another person. However, while there was some evidence of secularisation in Braedubh and Riverglebe, with individuals who expressed their suspicion of church initiatives, there was also a widespread willingness to have conversations about spirituality, echoing Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead's

⁴²⁷ Cf. Being with the Afflicted, Challenged and Dying in Wells, *Incarnational Ministry*, pp. 168-213.

⁴²⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 3.

⁴²⁹ Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, pp. 7-17.

investigation of subjectivization.⁴³⁰ As Alan Billings observed in *Lost Church*, questions about religion or beliefs tend to be difficult to interpret, particularly for people who would identify themselves as Christians based on their practices or associations but prefer to talk about spirituality.⁴³¹

For church and community members alike there was an underlying expectation that the minister would have the answers. It was the minister's responsibility to discuss faith and spiritual matters with groups and individuals because that was their job. They had been trained for it. As a researcher and theology student I was included in this expectation. I was regularly asked questions about the Bible and the Christian faith. On several occasions these questions were accompanied by comments about my approachability. I was a neutral party, a newcomer to the area, someone with the training and experience, someone who invested in building relationships and invited questions, while contributing to the local church and sharing my perspective. My role as an accompanier and facilitator created a safe space for discussions about topics that people were unwilling to raise with the minister. I was intrigued by the tension between the desire to know and the desire to maintain the illusion of belonging to the inner club by not revealing ignorance through questions. How could churches and church members be released to minister to their local areas while caught in this insecurity and fear of discovery? A sustainable future for rural parish churches would need to incorporate discipleship training and faith development.⁴³²

7.4.2.2 Contributing to the Future

Insecurity about addressing spiritual matters or faith was further complicated by the confusion and lack of clarity I found around roles and responsibilities within the church. People were more likely to focus on the barriers or challenges of situations than the opportunities. There were some roles, such as eldership, which carried a particular stigma among church members based on their perception of the role and its responsibilities. This was exacerbated by the lack of teaching about eldership within Braedubh, Riverglebe and the wider

⁴³⁰ Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, pp. 9–10.

⁴³¹ Billings, *Lost Church*, pp. 71–99.

⁴³² Cf. Rural Affairs Group, 'Released for Mission', pp. 24-25; Clark, 'An Effective Christian Presence', pp. 102-11.

presbytery. Elders themselves often focused on the external elements of their role, such as visiting within their district or attending meetings. One church member explained [they] could not be an elder because they were unable to visit people in their homes. This individual had been asked to become an elder and wanted to serve but was unable to overcome a sense of incapacity that was rooted in their limited understanding of eldership.

My fieldwork and broader experience with churches in Scotland highlighted a tension between this desire to contribute and a sense of inferiority. The natural outcome of this limitation and tension is a lack of volunteers or participants. As I discussed the issue with ministers and group leaders I reflected on the efficacy of personal invitations or requests to participate. In the absence of volunteers, a locum minister approached an individual about leading an initiative, convincing [them] to take the opportunity and offering support while affirming [their] belief in this individual's ability. Despite feeling unequal to the task, the individual felt compelled to try based on the minister's encouragement and invitation. The individual's fear of failure did not prevent [them] from participating because [they] were well supported by the minister. This echoed the pattern I witnessed in other churches where individuals were unwilling to volunteer but willing to help when they were specifically asked to fill a role or do a job.

I found echoes of a sense of insecurity or inferiority among church members in both churches, but I was also confronted by a systemic cultural mindset I had experienced across churches in Scotland. People were unwilling to volunteer to read, or lead prayers, or serve in some ministry capacity, because they were not the same as L— or J— who 'does it so well.' I found people who wanted to serve but either lacked confidence in their abilities *or* were afraid of sounding arrogant or conceited by volunteering, sometimes expressing a complicated mix of both. Self-deprecation is a common feature of Scottish humour and relational interaction where pride and arrogance are to be shunned, yet people want to achieve perfection in anything they do undertake.⁴³³

⁴³³ Craig, *Scots' Crisis of Confidence*, pp. 265–87.

I deeply identified with this tension in both my personal and academic experiences. As I considered the possibilities for addressing these issues I reflected on the importance and necessity of training, education, support, accountability and mentoring. Each has contributed to my own journey and each was repeatedly highlighted to me by their absence in the experience of church members. This absence reinforced the anxieties and uncertainties felt by church members and office bearers who were unsure of their roles or opportunities to contribute. Throughout my fieldwork I found individual people were limited by their perceptions of roles and duties rather than recognising the diversity of individual gifts, which could strengthen and develop the local church. The people who felt unprepared and uncertain of their own abilities were overwhelmed by a fear of failing, which eclipsed willingness to take risks and develop new initiatives.

7.4.3 Overwhelmed by Circumstance

The challenges in mindset and lack of support or training was exacerbated by the practical situations and circumstances facing both churches. I found church members in Braedubh who were exhausted, overwhelmed and discouraged by years of operating in apparent isolation and struggling to maintain forms and structures in the absence of a clear direction from a minister. The church in vacancy was also a church in a form of suspended animation, going through the motions with little variation. It was a church in crisis, facing an uncertain future with a leaking and crumbling building, declining membership, poor finances and increasing concerns about sustainability. They had little hope for change and no energy to dream of a future.

In Riverglebe, I found a church in transition, entering a new season of ministry under a new minister and with every apparent indication of potential for revitalisation; however, the impetus for change met resistance. Opportunities were available, but there was little receptivity from church members who had been conditioned to passivity and routine in the previous years. Initiatives for change were focused on community revitalisation and practical or social developments rather than considering the unique spiritual calling and commission of the Christian church.

During my first year of fieldwork I found it easy to be overwhelmed by the challenges facing both churches. I became absorbed in the weekly stresses and strains of looking to the following Sunday or considering how to mop up the water running down the wall. I heard stories of concerns over building inaccessibility and frustrations about music or the length of sermons. People told me of interpersonal conflict and tension between church members and office bearers which had left lasting effects. Throughout these conversations I heard a common thread of concern and frustration about external circumstances or issues. Each became an excuse for the state of the church, distracting church members and office bearers from the big picture of the future of mission and ministry.

One of the biggest challenges and barriers to creativity was the administrative burden of forms and legal structures or paperwork. Elders in local churches and the presbytery at large were overwhelmed, frustrated and discouraged by a perception of bureaucratic legalism imposed by '121' that left no room for initiative. New ideas and modifications to existing ministry plans or church buildings required reports, applications for funding, insurance, GDPR and safeguarding training, risk assessments, provision for health and safety, legal advice, approval from committees and responding to questions concerning measurable outcomes. Within the small and intimate context of individuals working in the local community, there is great potential for things to happen very quickly when there is a combination of initiative and momentum; however, they can be stifled just as quickly by obstructive systems or being mired in committee meetings and paperwork.⁴³⁴ A combination of fear and control or micromanagement restricts good things, even as it provides a necessary set of checks and balances to prevent harm or unsafe practices. In theory, small local churches could ask for support in completing the appropriate applications and reports, but I found many people were uncertain who to approach for help, reinforcing their sense of isolation.

⁴³⁴ Cf. Rural Affairs Group, 'Released for Mission', pp. 25-28.

7.4.4 Whose Job Is It?

In the face of overwhelming circumstances, church members were unable to consider the future, but they also seemed unaware of their own responsibilities. I repeatedly heard blame assigned to external people or complaints about circumstances with an underlying expectation that they should be addressed by ‘someone’ who would be able to ‘sort it out’ while the individual telling me about the issue waited for things to change. That ‘someone’ was most commonly to be the minister, or possibly a church elder. In rare situations it was the ‘Church of Scotland’ who were expected to intervene and fix the issue at hand, often to do with administrative or property matters. Mission and ministry were the purview of clergy as the ‘professionals’ who were trained to do it.⁴³⁵

The pattern of dependency upon the minister crippled both churches, limiting possibilities for development to the particular skill set or interests of the minister in post at the time. Simultaneously, the expectations of congregants for ministers had the potential to inhibit the calling and gifts of the minister by imposing restrictions or administrative burdens based on the previous minister’s interests.⁴³⁶ Reducing the focus and impetus of ministry and mission to the vision of a single person had a legacy in narrowing the vision and capacity of the churches to engage in mission and ministry in their local communities. Grassroots initiatives or those instigated by locum ministers were largely separate from the ‘central work of the church’ according to the church members. Those who were eager to be involved in developing new ideas had little scope for such development within the structure of both churches, leading to frustration.

This sense of confusion over roles was characteristic of my fieldwork. As I sought to understand the dynamics and roles of individuals I found myself being asked questions as often as I was asking questions. On several occasions I was approached by church members who had ideas about how they could serve the local church and community. They were unclear about the process and who they

⁴³⁵ Richard Impey, *How to Develop Your Local Church: Working with the Wisdom of the Congregation*, (London: SPCK, 2010), p. 27.

⁴³⁶ Impey, *How to Develop Your Local Church*, p. 139.

should speak to about implementing their ideas. I represented the church and the presbytery in my role as a researcher and consultant and became a ‘sounding board’ for congregants and clergy alike; however, I also felt their frustration and discouragement over poor engagement and implementation of ideas. In both churches, linkages, communities and the presbytery at large, I found individuals with exciting ideas and willing hands who were either ignored or obstructed through administrative regulations, committee discussion and/or active opposition.

The most dominant answer to my questions about responsibilities for mission and ministry placed the primary responsibility on the minister. As one participant said on occasion, ‘They might be Presbyterian in name but a lot of churches are closet Episcopalians in practice.’ The participant felt the practical expectation of congregants was for clear decision making and a hierarchy that placed the minister at the top, directing the church and all aspects of ministry rather than being a church governed by elders and held accountable by courts of peers.⁴³⁷

My fieldwork illustrates the dangers of church congregations becoming dependent on clergy.⁴³⁸ Braedubh and Riverglebe have not had the freedom to develop and shape ministries according to the local context and the gifts and talents of the individuals in their churches. Likewise, neither congregation had a sense of unified direction and vision or clear leadership. As discussed above, a lack of eldership training and team development reinforces a sense of inferiority and uncertainty, while tensions over the responsibilities of church members and clergy stifle creativity and initiative. Both clergy and church members are negatively impacted when there is conflict between the expectations and perceptions each have about their roles.

A minister who enters a charge with an interest in building a team ministry can feel stifled by congregants who expect [them] to be responsible for every aspect of the church and refuse to participate. Equally, congregants with ideas can be stifled by a minister or by other church members who feel it is inappropriate for

⁴³⁷ This was the participant’s interpretation of Episcopalian church structure.

⁴³⁸ Some examples include: Coate, *Clergy Stress*, pp. 151–82; Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Pastor* (Old Tappan: F.H. Revell, 1988), pp. 182–89; Derek Tidball, *Skilful Shepherds: Explorations in Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), pp. 315–37.

anyone but the minister to lead initiatives. In my fieldwork I heard comments and criticism about ministers who were not seen to be carrying out work according to the expectations of the congregants: ‘What are we paying [them] for anyway?’ or ‘Funny ideas that minister has about.... [Don’t they] know [...] is the most important part of [their] job?’ In each case, I questioned whether the unspoken expectation had been communicated to the minister. One member responded with the sentiment (paraphrased here): ‘Well, [they] should have been taught that then. Ministers used to be trained better.’

A sustainable and creative future for mission and ministry in rural Scottish churches will require a shift in perspective that reflects the diversity of gifts and abilities present among the people associated with the church and community. It will require redefinition of roles and space for working together to identify opportunities which further the joint goal and vision or purpose of mission and ministry in the local area. It will require humility and vulnerability in listening to one another and working together to respond to the calling to become more Christ-like and pursue the kingdom of God. Ministers and congregants alike will need to relinquish control and expectations, allowing space for God to move.

7.5 ‘It’s Aye Been’⁴³⁹

When I arrived in the Scottish Borders I needed to attune and adapt to local accents and colloquial phrases. Many Scots phrases which are common to the Borders are colourful, with layers of nuance that required me to develop my awareness of the local context and relationships. ‘It’s Aye Been’, or the shorter ‘aye bin’, is a multi-purpose phrase that indicates relation to the past. Although simplistic, the basic translation of the phrase is: ‘It has always been this way.’ The phrase also includes an element of implying: ‘It *will* always *be* this way.’ Essentially, ‘It’s always been this way so why change it.’ It can be applied to activities, groups, people, individuals, villages, local government. Some uses of the phrase include the following:

⁴³⁹ This section includes material from a paper I presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in San Diego in November 2019.

Och, it's aye been.

They're just aye bins.

Suffering from a case of aye bin?

We're an 'aye bin' place

Are you an 'aye been'?

It's all 'aye bin' wi' them.

But it's 'aye been' this way!

"Are they now? Ken,⁴⁴⁰ I thought they were 'aye beens'!"

I'm not going, it'll just be 'aye been'.

But... [long pause] It's aye been...

There is a range of meanings attached to each use of the phrase, dependent on context, tone of voice and the relationships between people. The most common and generalised interpretation is the idea of being 'stuck' in the past. The phrase is often used in a derogatory or dismissive way to speak of others. This can include comments in media or newspapers on the traditions which have been maintained in Border communities for several hundred years, or local people speaking about others who appear uninterested or unsupportive of change and new initiatives. However, the phrase can also be innocuous, simply stating a perceived fact about particular practices or activities. There is much to be learned from 'Aye Been' and the phrase itself provided a colourful way of reflecting on present situations in local churches. In my reports and subsequent discussions I was able to use the phrase to convey significant ideas that were immediately recognisable.

My fieldwork indicated that the communities and churches that defined themselves or others as 'aye been' were referring to their attachment to the past and their attitude towards change. It could be the so-called 'real' history

⁴⁴⁰ 'Ken' is a Scots word for the verb 'to know' that can be used, as here, as a replacement for the phrase 'you know'.

comprised of facts and figures but was more commonly a past attested by hearsay and viewed through a multi-faceted lens of perception, relationships and opinions. Each person I spoke with had their own perception of the past, describing the position of the church in the local community or their participation in the church from their perspective. When I asked about features of church and community life and practice, many people would reply with a story about the history of their family or the church in the area. Looking back at the past provided a way for them to explain to me, a newcomer, what was important in the church. It was also a way for church members to articulate their understanding of their church.

They prized tradition and family history. There was a sense of loss and grief over that which had been, such as having children in Sunday School. People told me of the times when the church was the centre of the community, and others told me of the disconnect between their church and community originating around WWI. 'Aye been' ensured preservation of the memory of people who had contributed to the church over generations. Many elements of church life could be described as 'aye been', referring to familiar practices for those who had been part of the church for generations, yet people were unable to articulate how or why different practices or traditions were important.

The phrase, and associated idea, contributed to the notion of corporate identity and continuity with the past. In my research I found both positive and negative aspects. 'Aye been' could refer to people who were unlikely or unwilling to change. Describing a church as 'aye been' implied they were deeply invested in the past, or a perceived version of the past, trying to recreate without considering the ways the world and their local village had changed.

Conversations around preparing for the future, changing practices or introducing new initiatives were greeted with suspicion and anxiety, or simply dismissed for being new. A culture of 'aye been' could stifle a church or community group while simultaneously preserving important features of corporate identity.

7.5.1 Has it really 'aye been'?

After being introduced to the concept I began questioning what the phrase really meant. I examined the traditions and practices of the churches with an

overarching question in mind about how ‘aye been’ might affect both the short and long-term future of mission and ministry in both churches. I found that ‘aye been’ often either referred to practices or traditions which originated within the living memory of church members, or was a way of saying ‘I don’t know where this started, or why, but I can’t imagine it changing.’

One of the most effective questions I asked during my fieldwork was ‘Why?’. I discovered that many people had not stopped to think about the purpose of traditions and rituals. Many had never felt able to ask ‘why’ and had just accepted the status quo. As L— said, ‘I never thought about why we stand when the Bible is brought in. It’s just “aye been”!’ [They were] fascinated by the history behind the tradition as I re-told the story of how that practice began in the Church of Scotland as a way of honouring the primacy of God’s word.

There were reasons ranging from the mundanely practical, such as sitting in the rear pews of the central section of Braedubh church because it was warmer and less draughty, to the deeply emotional attachment of one church member to a dusty banner which had been made by [their] mother weeks before her tragic death. The length and timing of services could often be traced to the personal preference of ministers or influenced by the expressed desire of church members to be home in time for lunch. Some elements of the church’s ministry had been innovative in their time but were no longer effective or contextually appropriate for the present-day church, such as establishing a local chapter of the Guild — originally started as a means of encouraging discipleship and involvement in ministry.⁴⁴¹ The Guild in Braedubh had become a monthly club with speakers, a cup of tea and a biscuit, catering for older, retired members of the community. Outsiders viewed it as a tired institution for old people. The attitude of many, both within the Guild and within the church, could be summed up as waiting to die. A sense of despair over the lost ‘glory days’ of the churches, when ‘the church was the centre of the community’ was coupled with uncertainty about the future.

⁴⁴¹ Church of Scotland, ‘Church of Scotland Guild’, accessed 8 November 2021, <https://churchofscotland.org.uk/serve/the-guild/about-us>

By encouraging church and community members to reflect on the reasons for the actions and traditions of their churches, I provoked emotional responses ranging from defensiveness to confusion or relief as people engaged with questions of purpose. Several people were suspicious of a possible ulterior motive for my questions. Was I trying to trick them into changing things? Surely it was better to just leave things alone! After all, the church was still open and Sunday services were still happening. The appearance of familiar forms and models reinforced their sense of security in the face of uncertainty about the future.

7.5.2 Seeing Beyond ‘It’s Aye Been’

Variations of the question or statements such as, ‘They’re just “aye been”’ or ‘it’s all “aye bin” wi’ them’, dismiss people or churches as unwilling or unable to change. However, it is more complicated than it may first appear. As I spoke with people and shared in their lives I was aware of their insecurities, fears and inability to see *how* to change. The overwhelming pressures of the present situation and the sheer practicalities of relying on dwindling resources (both human and financial) left little time to engage in ‘blue sky’ thinking or visionary dreaming. Many church members, and particularly office bearers, were so exhausted by simply trying to ‘keep the church going’ that they had no energy for anything else. One church member welcomed my arrival and greeted me with the statement, ‘We need an outside perspective and a vision for the future.’ This individual had been described to me as an ‘aye bin’ and dismissed as a lost cause by my informant, but in reality [they] were overwhelmed and exhausted.

7.5.3 Inspiration or Barrier

‘Aye Been’ can be a barrier to innovation and change: a way of holding off uncomfortable questions and reinforcing the status quo. A church that is ‘aye been’ can be a stagnant church absorbed with trying to recreate a particular version of the past in a present world which has changed. On the other hand, a church that actively engages in reflecting on its history can reclaim and revitalise existing traditions through restoring a sense of purpose and drive. When faced with a question about how to develop a more sustainable model of mission and ministry, these churches can draw on the wealth of historical

examples in their local area. As I reflected on the history of the Church of Scotland and re-told the local and national story of the foundations for parish ministry I found church members who were inspired by their story to consider what ‘could be’ in their future as a church. Possibilities included seeking to restore a sense of heart in the community by reviving the gala day tradition and giving it a new flavour, developing an intergenerational Messy Church to build relationships between the church and young families in the local area and being intentional about welcoming the local primary schools into the building for their end-of-term services. Each was linked to recovering a sense of the purpose of geographical ‘parish ministry’ by investing in interpersonal relationships with those living in the local area. The way forward for these churches was directly related to the ‘aye been’ foundations of their historical connections to the place and people of Braedubh and Riverglebe; however, the form or expression was new.

7.5.4 Honouring the Past, Living in the Present and Preparing for the Future

To quote one local blogger, “‘aye been’ doesn’t mean ‘aye wrong’.”⁴⁴² In other words, ‘don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater!’ There are important insights to be gained from the way things have been done in the past. The past, and our perception of it, influences our present situation and can help us prepare well for the future. I intentionally tried to understand the history of the people and places of Braedubh and Riverglebe as a means of interpreting the present situation, anticipating how they might respond to change and working towards planning for the future.

The best way to learn about the past was listening to stories and asking questions.⁴⁴³ Each person had a limited perspective based on their own experiences, so I needed to take time to piece them together. The past, and lessons from the past, grounded present expressions of church life, but the meaning had often been lost, reducing the traditions and rituals to empty forms

⁴⁴² “‘Aye Been’ Isn’t Always ‘Aye Wrong’ | Don Ledingham’s Learning Log”, accessed 23 November 2019, <https://www.edubuzz.org/donsblog/2007/07/07/aye-been-isnt-always-aye-wrong/>.

⁴⁴³ Cf. Hopewell, *Congregation*, pp. 140-49.

or activities; essentially, keeping the bathwater after the baby had grown up and left home. It was necessary to engage in investigation and reflection in order to uncover the precious things that should be continued in some form.

New initiatives were treated with suspicion for not following established patterns. Investing time in understanding the reasons behind particular practices would enable church members to engage with developing practices that maintain continuity with the past while engaging with the current context. New and innovative ideas could be in line with the 'aye been', while looking ahead to what 'could be'. During my fieldwork, this was modelled in the renewal of the Riverglebe Gala Day.⁴⁴⁴ In reinstating the Gala, the committee intentionally tried to include aspects and traditions from the past, while creating something new.

7.6 Collaboration and Learning from Each Other

During my fieldwork I noticed a tendency towards focusing on individual details and challenges, often to the exclusion of other options. When faced with questions about a vision for the future or about evaluating the potential changes which might be made in each church, people based their answers on their personal experiences. While this gave me insight into their perspectives, it limited their view of possibilities. As discussed above, the concept of 'it's Aye Been' often directed choices about what might be done in the present.

In such cases I found it helpful to look beyond the borders of my case study churches into the neighbouring parishes. There were two distinct examples of different approaches to ministry and mission which provided perspective on the possibilities for the future of mission and ministry in the Borders, which might be applied elsewhere in Scotland.

⁴⁴⁴ See Chapter 6.

7.6.1 'Ellieneuk'

'Ellieneuk' was a neighbouring rural parish church which had previously been linked with Riverglebe but was taken into guardianship⁴⁴⁵ by Crossbrae Presbytery following the retirement of the minister. It provides a useful illustration of the possibilities when viewed in conjunction with Riverglebe because of their shared history. Ellieneuk was a historic church with a tiny attendance (4-6 people attending once per month), set in a small rural hamlet too small to be counted as a 'Settlement' according to the Scottish Government. The building was cold, damp and unwelcoming. It lacked amenities such as toilet facilities or running water and was accessible only via steps on the main path through the cemetery.

Assessor elders and an interim moderator were appointed under the 'Basis for Guardianship' which gave the congregation three years to develop a viable ministry or the Presbytery would close the building. The Kirk Session began by implementing a second service in the month, agreeing with the interim moderator that it would be impossible to build a sense of community and unity within the church congregation if they only met once every four or five weeks. During the first year the congregation began introducing extra services for communion or special events and officially adopted a pattern of weekly worship within eighteen months.

The moderator began producing a monthly newsletter announcing the presence of the church, providing contact details and regular updates, countering the prevailing local narrative that the church was closing following the retirement of the previous minister. Along with the Session Clerk, the interim moderator began a process of visiting every dwelling within the parish bounds with a newsletter. Regular visits became a monthly pattern, during which the

⁴⁴⁵ 'Guardianship' is a term used to describe a church where the congregation is permitted to continue as a congregation while relinquishing their right to call a minister for a settled ministry, formerly known as a 'Continuing Vacancy' (See Act VII 2003, 10 (4) as amended by General Assembly in 2011). Guardianships are governed by the Presbytery according to the 'Basis for Guardianship' which may include review procedures or conditions for continuance. The Presbytery may appoint an interim moderator to oversee the congregation for a limited period. Church of Scotland, 'Guardianships', accessed 9 December 2021, https://churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/18053/Guardianships.pdf.

moderator and session clerk developed rapport with members of the community and extended invitations to Sunday worship.

The Kirk Session approached the property convenor for the presbytery for assistance and advice concerning the state of the building and began implementing changes to ensure the building was warm, dry and welcoming. This was possible as a result of an agreement for finances over the sale of the Riverglebe manse, relieving the financial pressure on the tiny congregation. The heating, lighting and accessibility issues were addressed, alongside a renewal of pastoral visiting and a revitalisation of Sunday worship. When I spent time with them, church members expressed their thanks to the presbytery and Riverglebe for the agreement, which enabled the transformation of the building.

Two steps were removed from the path through the churchyard, in addition to smoothing out and resurfacing the path for accessibility. Adding solar powered lampposts to the path ensured lighting on dark evenings during the winter months and church members or office bearers regularly greeted people on the path with small handheld torches to supplement the lighting. A ship's toilet was fitted in an unused side porch to ensure access to toilet facilities. The installation of a forced air heating system dried out the building and ensured that it was a welcoming environment. Teas and coffees could be offered after the service from a self-contained 'kitchen' unit using bottled water. Each of these practical elements facilitated hospitality and improved the sense of welcome for congregants, community members and visitors.

Sunday services demonstrated the changing model of ministry under the oversight of the interim moderator. Church members were invited to lead prayers, read scripture and present meditations as part of the regular service. People who lived locally began feeling a sense of belonging in 'their' church, which was becoming an active centre in the community with community-facing services and regular visiting. Visitors were welcomed on the path and at the door by the moderator and members of the Kirk Session. Orders of Service were prepared with the words for hymns and readings printed out in full, alongside directions for when to sit or stand. Music was provided by means of an electronic organ which allowed hymns to be pre-recorded and played during the service through the sound system. Each recording began with a full instrumental

verse to establish the tune and rhythm, enabling everyone to hear it clearly and join in with a sense of confidence.

As a researcher examining mission and ministry I was particularly drawn to the elements of transformation within the church membership and participation. Over the period of my fieldwork with Riverglebe and Braedubh I witnessed an extraordinary period of growth within Ellieneuk. Local people who had previously had no contact with the church began attending, responding to the regular visits and clear notification about services and events. People volunteered their time and talents to contribute to the transformation. New members willingly joined the church and new elders were trained over the period of eight weeks. Their training involved evening discussions and a meal together during which they addressed all aspects of the Church of Scotland from the history and doctrine to the tenets of faith and roles and responsibilities of elders. Their induction service was documented by a local photographer and witnessed by members of the community. A congregational board was elected and trained in their roles and responsibilities.

The culture of training and equipping church members extended beyond elders and members of the congregational board. Every church meeting or training event was publicised to the entire congregation, ensuring that kirk session meetings and planning discussions reflected the needs of the church members and the parish. The church members took ownership of 'their' church, recognising each member's unique contribution. The community which developed in Ellieneuk reflected the diversity of the parish, becoming ecumenical and reflecting the broad range of theological positions and church experiences of the people in the local parish. Sunday services gave individuals and groups the experience of leading worship and, as time progressed, preparing services in their entirety.

This culture of teamwork and group participation was evident in the meetings I attended as an observer. Members of the congregation proposed the development of a Mission Programme which would enable the church to become intentionally missional. The Mission meeting and discussion involved more than 20 people sharing their thoughts and considerations about what the church in Ellieneuk could be doing to engage missionally with their local area and beyond.

Every person in the room contributed their ideas and engaged in the discussion. I heard enthusiasm tempered by practical suggestions and I watched the mix of former members and new members come together in a joint desire to share in the mission of the church. I was intrigued by the diversity of perspectives on the purpose of mission and the agreement that the purpose and goal of mission was twofold: 1) to bring people into the church and the worshipping community and 2) to meet the needs of the people in the local area and share the love of God and the promise of the gospel.

The culture of commitment and fellowship within the church was evident in their interactions with each other. People sent their apologies if they were unable to attend services, creating a culture of loyalty and commitment which extended into a desire to meet every week for Sunday worship. Despite beginning with a handful of people, within two years there were regularly between thirty and forty people attending each week. Many church members led services or initiated mid-week meetings, hosting people in their homes and inviting neighbours to attend the church. The church in Ellieneuk demonstrated the importance of involving each member and creating an atmosphere of joy and celebration, reflecting the pattern I witnessed with the Riverglebe choir.

Throughout the period of my fieldwork I watched the developments in Ellieneuk with interest. Although Ellieneuk was not directly part of my fieldwork, before I left the area I intentionally spent time with the interim moderator and asked if there were some church members who would be willing to give me their perspective on the developments within the church. I was convinced that there would be elements of the story of Ellieneuk that would provide a necessary complement to my observations and reflections on Braedubh and Riverglebe. Beginning with a simple summary of my interest in the future and sustainability of mission and ministry in rural parish churches I invited their responses and asked them to describe their assessment of the church and its development.

"I look forward to every gathering."

"We couldn't have done it without [the interim moderator]."

"[The moderator] led by example."

"I never would have imagined a year ago that I would be leading a service!"

"We get the training and mentoring through the process and it's wonderful."

"I've learned so much since coming to the church. [The moderator] teaches us about the history and setting of the passages [in the lectionary]."

"The best thing has been working together. We're all committed to seeing it succeed."

"It's inspiring to be part of [Ellieneuk]!"

"Having the order of service is so useful through the week. And I can use it to tell my friends about the services!"

"I never knew what to expect in church so I never went, but when [they] kept visiting with the newsletter each month I was curious."

"My favourite thing is seeing people each week."

"The singing is wonderful! I feel like I'm part of something special every week."

As I reflected on the developments within Ellieneuk, I saw the practical outworking of the possibilities I highlighted within my case study churches. There was an intentional shift towards local, contextualised and active relationship building and mentoring, inviting church and community members to participate in church initiatives. There was a clear purpose that looked towards the future, dreaming about long term goals and taking steps to communicate those dreams to the people involved at multiple levels. I saw a programme of teaching and instruction that equipped local church members with tools and opportunities to develop in their gifts and understanding of the Christian faith. Entrepreneurial leadership and hard work inspired local people. Welcoming and encouraging people to invest their natural interests and gifts in the work of the church made it possible for individuals and families to feel valued, knowing their contributions were shaping the church.

I was fascinated by the local gossip in the wider area and the number of people I heard speaking about Ellieneuk. My local chemist in Braedubh had a family member who was involved with Ellieneuk and had begun attending the church, despite having no previous association or interest in church participation. People I encountered throughout the local area were evangelistic about what was happening in Ellieneuk. They were excited about growth and people began travelling to attend the church and become part of the community. As I travelled and lived in the local area I heard differing perspectives and rumours about what was happening, but everyone agreed that it was something remarkable.

This created tensions with neighbouring churches, particularly those which lost members to Ellieneuk. I witnessed complex reactions to Ellieneuk's development within the presbytery. Some were excited and supportive of the revitalisation of Ellieneuk, seeking to understand the phenomenon and how things could be adapted in their own local church. Others appeared resentful and combative, vocally opposing the changes and accusing the interim moderator of undermining neighbouring parishes by 'stealing' members or desecrating the building by removing the old organ. When I spoke with the interim moderator about this reaction, [they] were very clear that [they] would welcome anyone who came to the church but [their] priority would always be the residents of the local parish, visiting those who lived within the parish boundaries.

The interim moderator brought a wealth of experience from previous parishes where [they] had invested in holistic church and community investment and development. By choosing to prioritise every aspect of people, place, parish and practices, the interim moderator changed the narrative of the church from one of isolationism to one of public engagement. As a retired minister, the interim moderator invested countless hours in establishing communication and relationship with every household in the parish. [Their] investment resulted in surprising connections with people who were willing to share their gifts and abilities with the church, regardless of their faith position or denominational affiliation. Viewing the church building as a community building, the moderator prioritised creating a warm, dry and welcoming space that could function as a 'place' of encounter for everyone who walked through the door for a regular

service or a one-off event. The same attitude was prevalent in constructing services that were accessible and well-signposted with clearly printed directions for those who were unfamiliar with the regular forms of Church of Scotland services. The interim moderator's commitment to parish ministry included investing in discipleship and training, preparing every church member to serve in the ministry and mission of the church and encouraging them to take opportunities to lead.

During my conversation with the church members I intentionally asked them what would happen if the interim moderator was incapacitated or left the church on short notice. I was curious about their response in light of the fear and anxiety expressed among church members in Riverglebe when faced with my questions about their minister's future retirement. After a short pause each member indicated their conviction that the work that had started would continue. It might change and look different, but they expressed confidence that the church would survive and continue to move from strength to strength because they had all invested in the developments within the church. Each person felt their voice was being heard and they had grown in their abilities and confidence. They all acknowledged that it would be a loss and they would grieve that loss, but it would not stop the growth and development of mission and ministry in their local area and beyond. Although the interim moderator had initiated the transformation of Ellieneuk, the people who found a sense of belonging in Ellieneuk were fully committed to the vision of being a transformational Christian community rooted in their particular place.

7.6.2 'Freshfield'

Where Ellieneuk provides a vision for the future of a traditional parish church, Freshfield offers a perspective on the local and contextual possibilities for partnership between traditional churches and grassroots expressions of Christian community. The group was started in partnership between a local farmer and the locum minister as a separate fellowship from the Sunday service, aimed at local families and focusing on building relationships over monthly meals and discussion times. Over the years it began to incorporate a monthly Sunday morning worship time in addition to the afternoon gathering.

I found a team of people involved who were committed to serving each other, using their respective abilities and interests to organise social events, set up the hall, run children's activities and facilitate links with the community. I was intrigued by the hive of activity around the afternoon gathering and the Sunday morning gathering as people engaged in fellowship with each other. They needed a team to set up the community hall for each gathering, which encouraged active participation. At the same time, they invited such participation by shaping the ministry around the needs of the local community and individuals. The locum minister mentored the 'lay' leader through the early years, and the leader pursued some theological training and short courses alongside their everyday work on the farm. [They] passed on their knowledge and learning to the team of leaders, prioritising discipleship and team building, welcoming the contributions of fellowship members.

During my time in the local area I found a variety of perspectives on the purpose and efficacy of this 'fresh expression' of church. Some traditional church members were resentful, expressing their conviction that the gathering was taking families away from 'real' church and accelerating the decline of the local church. A retired minister in the presbytery felt that the gathering should have been more intentionally incorporated with the local parish church, encouraging families to participate in the local church on Sunday mornings and encouraging church members to join in the family fellowship times. Instead, Freshfield became its own entity, a 'church' in its own right, albeit one without a fully ordained clergy person.

Conflicting expectations and priorities created tension that were difficult to overcome, but there was evidence of individuals who recognised the blessing of working together in a mixed economy seeking to serve the local community. As I invited responses from participants on the areas where God was demonstrably moving in the local area, several people acknowledged the witness and testimony of Freshfield, prompting a member of the Freshfield community to express their thanks with an air of wonder and the observation that it had been a long road where [they] felt the local parish church and Crossbrae Presbytery had opposed their growth. I concluded that the controversy around Freshfield might have been mitigated or avoided if relationships and clear communication between the two groups had been facilitated well in the early stages of

development and subsequent years. As I reflected on the situation, it was clear that both Freshfield and the Presbytery could have benefitted from a closer working relationship if they had been united in pursuing God's mission and purpose in the local area, despite their different approaches.

Towards the end of my fieldwork I witnessed a transition within Freshfield as leadership changed, reflecting the team of people who had become leaders within the group. Individual gifts and abilities were affirmed and released as the primary leader stepped back from direct leadership to focus on other things. A corresponding change in the local parish church increased the opportunities for partnership as congregants and members from both groups intentionally articulated their desire to pursue the kingdom of God in the local area. By leaning into their respective strengths and inhabiting their own identities as individual groups, neither group was in danger of being absorbed by the other, but they no longer appeared to be in competition with each other. Rather, leaders from each communicated their active support for the other, recognising their difference and affirming their roles in serving different demographic groups.

7.6.3 Potential for the Future

Both Ellieneuk and Freshfield offer insight into the potential for the future of mission and ministry in rural areas. They rely on, and are shaped by, the local people who are involved. They demonstrate the importance of contextuality and relationships. They also illustrate the benefits of training and mentoring in preparing for the future. Both examples required intentional leadership decisions in the early stages, facilitating the development of a culture of collaboration and group involvement.

Arguably, both Ellieneuk and Freshfield could be viewed as Fresh Expressions or 'Pioneer Ministries.' Ellieneuk was operating within the bounds and guidelines of an inherited parish model but the church had nearly died prior to the arrival of an interim moderator who was an entrepreneur and fully committed to the potential of incarnational parish ministry.⁴⁴⁶ Although much of the impetus for

⁴⁴⁶ Cf. Billings, *Lost Church*, pp. 101-29; Billings, *Secular Lives*, pp. 103-24; Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, pp. 144-69.

change originated with the interim moderator, [they] were ably and enthusiastically supported by people who were inspired by a vision of a church that was rooted in the local community and context. There was less of the 'aye been' mentality within the church as the few remaining church members had been given the ultimatum to change or close. Maintaining 'aye been' was no longer an option. The shift within the local community was not bound by attempts to maintain previous models, giving them the freedom to explore church in their context. For all intents and purposes, Ellieneuk church went through a similar transition to that of the Riverglebe Gala Day. It was re-seeded with people who were committed to a vision of a church actively investing in the village and surrounding area.

As a researcher, I was encouraged to see practical evidence that a rural parish church could experience revitalisation and growth, changing its trajectory and embracing opportunities as a corporate body. My enthusiasm for the potential of applying the lessons of Ellieneuk was balanced by my awareness that the type of change found in Ellieneuk was heavily dependent on the dedication and hard work of one individual, who happened to be ordained clergy. However, this serves as a helpful illustration of the ongoing importance of clergy during this time of transition in local parish ministry. The church needs well-educated and experienced people in positions of leadership who are fully committed to a vision of the future that equips the body of Christ to pursue the furtherance of the kingdom of God in Scotland. As such, Ellieneuk and Freshfield provide a vision of what could be.

7.7 Summary: A Story of What Has Been

As my fieldwork ended and I presented my last report I was left with stories. As a researcher I continue to hold these stories as illustrative of the challenges and opportunities facing rural parish churches in the Borders. By highlighting the unsustainability of the current models and approaches to mission and ministry, I have articulated the dilemma facing Braedubh and Riverglebe, as representatives of rural parish churches across Scotland. I have argued that these churches have a limited understanding of their purpose and calling, which has been further undermined by a crisis of confidence, overwhelming circumstances and confusion over responsibilities.

I have addressed the pervasive narrative of traditionalism that has been used as an excuse to avoid change, questioning the reality of 'aye been' and challenging churches to examine their assumptions. While I agree that the legacy and consistent witness of parish churches should be honoured, I also argue that churches must be willing to let go of forms and practices which are dysfunctional. This creates space for new initiatives.

By way of counter-balancing the narrative of decline and unsustainability, I introduced two vibrant examples of rural mission and ministry from the local area. Each offers a perspective on what is *possible* in the local context when there is a clear vision and sense of purpose. Both prioritised local, contextual approaches to ministry and mission, focusing on training and equipping people to share in the task of witnessing to their local area.

The entirety of my experiences and my reflections form the basis for developing a rural missiology that is both practical and contextual. In the next two chapters I will evaluate the missiological significance of different aspects of my fieldwork and address possibilities for the future of rural mission and ministry in Scotland. The current model and practices in Braedubh and Riverglebe may be unsustainable, but my fieldwork suggests that change is possible. There is *potential* for both churches, and rural parish churches across Scotland, to embrace a new season of opportunity, revitalisation and growth.

Chapter 8 Prophetic Practice: Developing a Practical Rural Missiology

19/9/2018

Extracts from Joint Churches Gathering Discussion Notes

Ministry

We agreed that 'ministry' is a difficult thing to describe/define because we all have different ideas about what could or should be labelled as 'ministry'. Rather than get caught up in specifics and potentially legalistic arguments about what is/isn't ministry we thought about what we did agree:

Ministry is about serving.

Ministry is about living a life that is becoming increasingly Christ-like and serving each other in love... it should build up... making space for everyone to serve according to their gifts...

Mission

'Mission' cannot, and should not, be separated from 'ministry'. They are interrelated and cyclical - one informs the other.

Keywords: Directional, Intentional and Brought about by God

One of the problems with 'mission' as a word/concept is that it can become a project or programme with defined/limited goals and outcomes. People can be resentful or defensive if they feel they are being 'missioned'.

Mission is relational!

In the previous chapters I offered a perspective on the lived realities of Braedubh and Riverglebe. I argued that the metaphor of a *choir* could be applied to rural parish churches and that the metaphor of a *compere* could be used to inform the practice of ordained clergy. In retelling the stories of my experiences in the Borders I reached the conclusion that current traditional models and approaches to rural parish mission and ministry are unsustainable. However, my fieldwork experiences and the evidence of Ellineuk and Freshfield illustrate the *potential* for the future of rural parish churches. Realising that potential requires people to engage in prophetic practice, addressing the

present reality by calling churches to embrace a clear vision and purpose as the body of Christ.

In this chapter I expand my reflections on mission and ministry, responding to the lack of clarity I found among church members (7.4.1). I argue that a clear vision is essential for rural parish churches to respond to the opportunities of their local contexts by engaging in incarnational mission and ministry. I also argue that rural parish churches should invest in revitalising corporate worship, recognising the centrality of worship in the *missio Dei* and the life of the church. I use the Five Marks of Mission to develop a rural missiology, informed by my fieldwork and reflections. In crafting a missiology for rural churches, I offer a means of evaluating existing practice and inspiring transformation for the future.

8.1 Envisioning Rural Mission

During my fieldwork I discovered a common theme of confusion or misunderstanding about the purpose of mission and ministry. During my fieldwork I participated in and facilitated conversations about mission and ministry, looking at definitions by Samuel Wells or discussing the *missio Dei* (Mission of God) as presented by Christopher Wright.⁴⁴⁷ The Joint Churches Gathering I facilitated in September 2018 highlighted different ways of interpreting ministry and mission as people discussed concepts like the ‘kingdom of God’ or ‘body of Christ’. I found people who struggled to articulate their perspectives on ministry in rural parish churches and the possibilities for local churches to engage in mission. Instead, parish church members focused on maintaining the forms or practices of previous generations without considering their impact or purpose. Contributions from Northfield or Freshfield members stimulated conversations about the ‘big picture’, raising questions about definitions of ‘ministry’ or ‘mission’.

Alan Hirsch, in his 2006 book *The Forgotten Ways*, highlights the importance of mission as an organising principle for churches, observing that,

⁴⁴⁷ Wells, *Incarnational Mission*, pp. 16–17; Wright, *The Mission of God*, pp. 22–23.

A church that aims at ministry seldom gets to mission even if it sincerely intends to do so. But the church that aims at mission will have to do ministry, because *ministry is the means* to do mission. Our services, our ministries, need a greater cause to keep them alive and give them their broader meaning.⁴⁴⁸

He is convinced that failing to keep mission as the guiding principle leads to stagnation and the eventual death of a church which has lost perspective, summarised in his declaration:

To forget mission is to forget ourselves; to forget mission is to lose our *raison d'être* and leads to our eventual demise.⁴⁴⁹

In light of my fieldwork, I concluded that failing to consider or articulate a clear vision was one of the contributing factors to the inertia I witnessed in Braedubh and Riverglebe. In line with Hirsch, I suggest the future for rural parish churches depends upon recovering or re-visioning a sense of mission as the calling and driving force for the church. Developing and communicating a clear direction has the potential to encourage participation and a sense of ownership or belonging among church members. A defining purpose enables churches to be proactive, but also to make difficult decisions about their priorities and be willing to let go of programmes or traditions that do not serve their primary calling and purpose.

8.2 Incarnational Presence and *Missio Dei*

Throughout my fieldwork and thesis I focused on people, places, parishes and practices. My experiences were contextual and unique to each location, group of people and opportunity. My approach to research was rooted in investing time in *being with* people and accompanying them through a journey of discovery and reflection as I asked questions and participated in activities or events.⁴⁵⁰ As I did so, I came to appreciate the unique capacity of rural churches to embody Christian mission through every action and interaction as they are embedded in their local villages. My exploration of 'parish' as a concept

⁴⁴⁸ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), p. 236.

⁴⁴⁹ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p. 237.

⁴⁵⁰ Cf. Wells, *Incarnational Ministry*, pp. 8-9.

revealed theological foundations for a parish church to be understood as an incarnational Christian presence within a specified geographical location.⁴⁵¹ Therefore, the vision is for parish churches to be incarnational, providing practical and pastoral care, discipleship, training and spiritual oversight to everyone within the parish boundaries. This is the historic foundation of the Church of Scotland, which means the future for parish churches involves returning to forgotten ways of being.⁴⁵²

An incarnational approach to mission and ministry in rural Scotland requires churches to look beyond *missiones ecclesiae* (missions of the Church) to engage in the *missio Dei* (Mission of God). Failing to engage in a process of discernment, evaluating the purpose of their actions or activities, contributes to ‘aye been’ and makes it difficult for churches to adapt or prioritise their actions well. In the Joint Churches gathering, I challenged participants to consider their definitions of ministry and mission, asking them to stop and reflect on the meaning and purpose of each. In the excerpt above, they agreed that ministry and mission were interdependent and should be relational, directional, intentional and ‘brought about by God’. Further reflections in following meetings involved asking the question, ‘where is God at work in [our place]?’ and exploring ways in which individuals and groups might participate in the *missio Dei*. For many, this was a useful exercise in looking beyond human activity; but, as Alan Smith observes, focusing on exclusively on the *actions* of God rather than reflecting on God’s character and looking for opportunities of encounter with God limits the capacity of the Church to be incarnational representations of God’s love.⁴⁵³

Therefore, the starting place for a robust rural missiology is an encounter with God in rural places with rural people. Beginning with the *actions* of God may be a helpful way to facilitate an encounter with God by encouraging people to reflect on God’s active presence and participation in the world. I propose that rural parish churches in Scotland should embrace their contextuality and calling to be *present* in the local community. My fieldwork indicates that rural

⁴⁵¹ Cf. Rumsey, *Parish*, pp. 180-88; Billings, *Lost Church*, pp. 124-28.

⁴⁵² Cf. Neilson, *Church on the Move*, pp. 48-49.

⁴⁵³ Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, pp. 50-61.

churches are on the border edge of recognising their capacity for intentional, missional relationships with their neighbours and I suggest it is time for churches to engage in critical theological reflection on their existing practices as they envision their future. My research led me to conclude a sustainable future for mission in rural parish churches is one that is an embodied, holistic expression of participating in the *missio Dei* as witnesses to the saving love and transforming power of Jesus Christ in the created world.

8.3 Revitalising Worship: Foundational for Rural Mission

As discussed above, I affirm the position of Andrew Kirk, who argues that the Church, as called by Jesus Christ, exists exclusively to fulfil the '*missio Dei*, bearing witness to God's activity in the world by its communication of the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed.'⁴⁵⁴ For theologians such as John Drane, this involves 'recognising what God is already doing' in the world.⁴⁵⁵ However, I found that church members in Riverglebe and Braedubh were unfamiliar with the idea of looking for places where God might be working in their local context, and some individuals were unconvinced that God *was* active in the world. Articulating a vision of mission with language about participating in the *missio Dei* was, therefore, beyond their understanding or experience.

Therefore, I advocate a restoration of corporate worship, prayer and discernment. If the purpose of mission is to share the good news of Jesus Christ to enable others to encounter and glorify God, it follows that the church should prioritise worship and praise.⁴⁵⁶ Rural parish churches need to reclaim their identities as worshiping communities, focused on the person of God as a *being*, not simply a *doing* or active God.⁴⁵⁷ Robert Warren draws attention to worship as the means by which a healthy church facilitates encounters with God where people experience God's love and presence in a community of faith.⁴⁵⁸ This, in

⁴⁵⁴ Kirk, *What Is Mission?*, p. 31.

⁴⁵⁵ Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, p. 10. Bell, Hopkinson and Willmott, 'Reading the Context', p. 1.

⁴⁵⁶ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), pp. 244–62.

⁴⁵⁷ Cf. Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, 2008, pp. 50–60.

⁴⁵⁸ Warren, *Healthy Churches' Handbook*, pp. 19–22.

turn, serves to strengthen and motivate church members and visitors to explore possibilities for serving God and each other, growing in faith and confidence in sharing God's love.

In my experiences of corporate worship with Braedubh and Riverglebe I found passivity, disengagement and frustration or emptiness expressed by members of the churches following services with poor singing, obscure hymns and confusing sermons. They were not excited about worship, focusing instead on the practical realities of their experiences and becoming increasingly discouraged by their sense of duty. I noticed a marked difference within the congregation on the occasions where people were confident in singing out or the minister actively engaged with the congregants throughout the service. People were inspired and encouraged by joint ecumenical services with strong singing and congregational participation. Christmas services were popular, and I found a sense of freedom and comfort among congregants, partly facilitated by familiar carols and readings which enabled corporate participation. There was a sense of joy that motivated people to invite their friends and neighbours to holiday services.

I cannot judge the hearts or minds of the people with whom I was privileged to spend time during my fieldwork, but I was challenged by those who admitted their unbelief or their aversion to engaging with questions of faith both personally and in company with others. I struggled to reconcile their words and behaviour with my understanding of a calling to Christian witness and subsequent transformation through discipleship. This is not to dismiss their contributions to the mission and witness of the church, particularly in terms of their commitment to social or environmental initiatives, but I questioned their motivation for being involved with mission. For these individuals, the mission and ministry of the church was more about social or cultural 'belonging' to the parish than about encountering God and the same applied to their understanding of corporate worship. I have already proposed that Sunday services might helpfully be viewed as 'practices' or opportunities to equip the congregation to engage in mission and ministry beyond the walls of the church (section 5.5). I now propose that revitalising worship is foundational for the future of mission and ministry in rural parish churches.

My research indicates that refocusing and revitalising worship as a corporate experience of encountering God should be a priority within rural parish churches. As a singer, I am naturally drawn to churches where music is used to facilitate that encounter. There are numerous resources available to provide musical accompaniment, but the best resources will make little difference without participation. If churches invest in listening to local people and developing teams for mission and ministry, this should extend to the structure and practice of corporate worship. As John Drane observes, worship ‘ought to create a context in which people can be themselves, which is another way of saying that we need spaces where we may celebrate the way God has made us.’⁴⁵⁹ Therefore, for churches like Braedubh and Riverglebe I recommend encouraging church and community members to contribute their favourite hymns and songs, then using a combination of well-known favourites with new or unfamiliar choices. Repeating unfamiliar tunes over a period of time encourages people to develop in confidence, while reinforcing the theological themes or aspects emphasised in that hymn or song, as people are freed to think about the words rather than focusing on the tune or their own self-consciousness.

Alongside praise, I strongly advocate for the recovery of lament in personal and public worship, teaching and mission.⁴⁶⁰ For more than thirty years theologians have been writing about the need to restore lament in churches; however, lament continues to be poorly understood and underutilised.⁴⁶¹ In 1986, Walter Brueggemann wrote about ‘The Costly Loss of Lament’ and the crippling impact of removing lament from public worship, discipleship and prayer.⁴⁶² Prayer and worship without lament become superficial at best, failing to engage with the reality of life and alienating people who are struggling. Lament has the potential to facilitate honest encounters with God in the midst of overwhelming and difficult circumstances. It also has the potential to bridge the perceived gap

⁴⁵⁹ Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, p. 170.

⁴⁶⁰ Heather Major, ‘How Long O Lord?!’ *Mosaic*, April 2021, pp. 20-21; Heather Major, ‘Responding to Pain and Suffering: Mission and Lament’. Missiology Group. Post-Covid Theology Project. Churches Together in England, December 2021. <https://cte.org.uk/working-together/postcovidtheology/missiology/>.

⁴⁶¹ Cf. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, eds. *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); G. Geoffrey Harper and Kit Barker, eds. *Finding Lost Words: The Church’s Right to Lament* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

⁴⁶² Walter Brueggemann, ‘The Costly Loss of Lament’. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 36 (1 October 1986): pp. 57–71.

between superficial celebration or praise and the messy realities of life, enabling churches to embrace opportunities to accompany and support people who are experiencing suffering and distress.⁴⁶³

I propose that churches will find a new sense of purpose for mission and ministry if they recover their identity as worshipping communities, characterised by vitality, passion and a desire for more of God. Mission, praise and lament are appropriate responses to the ‘prior reality and action of God’ and intertwined in Christian life.⁴⁶⁴ Corporate worship and a God-centred life forms a foundation that supports the missional work of churches; while restoring a sense of perspective and balance to human endeavours.⁴⁶⁵ As Melba Maggay notes, fulfilling the Christian mandate for mission requires *both* loving God and loving our neighbours.⁴⁶⁶ Therefore, worship and prayer is necessary for churches in fulfilling their missional calling as a whole. Neglecting worship limits the effectiveness and calling of the church to love and glorify God by engaging in holistic, embodied mission among the people of their local places.

8.4 Five Marks of Mission

My fieldwork indicates a narrow definition of ‘mission’ and ‘ministry’ has contributed to a lack of understanding among church members, resulting in apathy and stagnation. In response, I turn to the Five Marks of Mission, used throughout the Anglican Communion and given a strong commendation by Doug Gay in his influential book *Reforming the Kirk*, based on his 2017 Chalmers Lectures.⁴⁶⁷ They provide a framework and reference for considering different

⁴⁶³ Carl R. Trueman, ‘What Can Miserable Christians Sing?’ In *The Wages of Spin: Critical Writings on Historic and Contemporary Evangelicalism*, (Fearn: Mentor, 2004), pp. 157–63.

⁴⁶⁴ Wright, *The Mission of God*, p. 134.

⁴⁶⁵ Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, pp. 51–56.

⁴⁶⁶ Melba Maggay, ‘To Respond to Human Needs by Loving Services (i)’, in *Mission in the Twenty-First Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, ed. Andrew F. Walls and Cathy Ross, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), pp. 46–52.

⁴⁶⁷ Gay, *Reforming the Kirk*, pp. 83, 98–114.

aspects of the church's role in the local community and the potential for a sustainable future:⁴⁶⁸

The Five Marks of Mission:

The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom;
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers;
3. To respond to human need by loving service;
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation;
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.⁴⁶⁹

In light of my fieldwork experiences, I suggest that rural parish churches are *capable* of engaging with all Five Marks, transcending the limitations of existing local conceptions of mission as they recognise and embrace opportunities in their local contexts; however, many local church congregations are limited by their perceptions of their contextual challenges. By critically reflecting on these Five Marks I encourage churches to review their priorities and actively engage in the *missio Dei* in their local parish. Each has the potential to stimulate theological reflection and action, collectively enabling local congregations to review their own practices in light of their calling to be incarnational witnesses in rural areas.

8.4.1 Proclamation

The first mark, 'To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom', is the most easily identifiable as 'mission' in the traditional sense as it was understood by Braedubh and Riverglebe church members. Articulating the core beliefs of the Christian faith and sharing the gospel serves as a way of distinguishing between a church and another social club or group with concern for the local community.

⁴⁶⁸ In agreement with the Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland (2020), I approach the Five Marks as a definition and vision statement for a big picture of mission rather than providing a programme of reform that is applicable in every church regardless of context. In this I am following in the footsteps of missiologists such as Dr Cathy Ross who affirms the Five Marks as a 'good working basis for a holistic approach to mission.' Cathy Ross, 'Introduction: Taonga', in *Mission in the Twenty-First Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, ed. Andrew F. Walls and Cathy Ross, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), pp. xiii–xvi, at p. xiv.

⁴⁶⁹ Adopted by the Lambeth Conference in 1988. 'Marks of Mission', accessed 4 April 2020, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>. For further details and discussion, see Christopher Wright, *Five Marks of Mission: Making God's Mission Ours*, (no place: Micah Global, 2016), pp. 9–13.

If the calling and purpose of churches is to act as a witness to the kingdom and glory of God in a local context, then the faithful proclamation of the good news is foundational to the existence of the church, not merely an isolated aspect.⁴⁷⁰ However, the means by which the gospel is proclaimed may vary according to context, from formal services to informal conversations between friends and neighbours.

The language of proclamation and evangelism reinforces the attitudes of members, and ministers, ‘diminish[ing] the central importance of the public witness of the entire community by focusing on the actions and personality of particular office-holders.’⁴⁷¹ In my experience in the Borders, the general understanding among church members of ‘proclamation of the good news’ or evangelism was superficial at best and dismissive at worst. Many of my participants associated the idea of evangelism with, as one participant described them, ‘crazy fundamentalist American Christians’. The burden of publicly proclaiming the gospel was placed on the minister as the person who was trained and ordained to say the right things at the right times. Elders were uncomfortable speaking about faith or spiritual matters and there was little evidence of the church membership sharing their understanding of the faith with their neighbours. By implication, evangelism was the responsibility of the minister or those with particular positions or training rather than elders or the wider congregation.

Based on the superficial understanding of evangelism demonstrated among my participants, the most obvious places and opportunities for evangelism in local communities were in public settings such as Sunday services. As I discovered, rural churches have a significant role in the life of their villages, welcoming people into their buildings to mark passing seasons (5.6.1) or host school services (5.6.3). Each of these has traditionally been dependent on the minister as the visible representation of the church, but this limits the potential for the church congregation to engage with evangelism as part of sharing in the *missio Dei*.

⁴⁷⁰ D. Zac Niringiye, ‘To Proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom (ii)’, in *Mission in the Twenty-First Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, ed. Andrew F. Walls and Cathy Ross, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), pp. 11–24, at p. 24; Wright, *Five Marks of Mission*, pp. 14–19.

⁴⁷¹ Guder, *Called to Witness*, p. 156.

The development of Riverglebe Village Events began as a result of an individual's desire to invest in the community to 'restore its heart', in direct response to a perceived need for social activities. Over the period of my fieldwork I witnessed relationships form and shifting attitudes among local people towards the church as a building and as an institution. After years of neglect, people began to identify the parish church as a place they felt comfortable entering, creating positive associations with the building and the people. Public attendance at the Remembrance Day service in 2018 was markedly higher than previous years, despite miscommunication and delays, partly due to the decision to rearrange the order of events and go to meet the village members at the memorial when it was obvious that people were gathering. Riverglebe church was intentional about going to the people rather than insisting on maintaining tradition at all costs. As a result, villagers joined in the Sunday service, participating in gathered worship in *their* church, which had become a place for facilitating encounters between villagers and the congregation. As a result of their encounter with people and the building, these villagers had an opportunity to listen to the public proclamation of the Good News and share in worship, even volunteering to sing with the choir at a future Remembrance Day service. An incarnational approach to evangelism requires churches to recognise the potential avenues for public witness through events, activities, relationships and place.⁴⁷²

The evidence suggests evangelism is most effective in the ebb and flow of daily life in rural villages, through informal communication and personal connections rather than formal services. Small rural towns or villages in the Borders still have an emphasis on relational networking and a well-earned reputation for gossip. The people who are known to attend churches have an opportunity to demonstrate their priorities in spoken and unspoken ways and may be seen as more approachable than the minister. As I lived in the local community, I had opportunities to talk about the church or about the Bible as I responded to questions from local people. One church member who introduced me to a small group of locals in the pub one evening sat in amazement as I answered questions about creation and evolution, explaining my perspective on Genesis. As I prepared to leave the group asked if I intended to become an ordained minister

⁴⁷² Walker, *God's Belongers*, pp. 101-03.

to which I replied that I felt it was my responsibility as a Christian to be engaged in mission and ministry every day, but I had no intention of being ordained. They responded with vaguely surprised looks, raising their eyebrows and shaking their heads as one said, ‘Well, if the church had more communicators like you, there would be more people in church.’ By implication, as I was engaging in conversation I was changing their perception of ‘church’ and Christianity. The experience demonstrated the potential for informal evangelism in Braedubh and Riverglebe.

My interactions with members of the community reinforced my assessment that rural parish churches in Scotland are suffering from a division between Sunday services and ‘real life’. Approaching evangelism from an incarnational perspective, every interaction between the collective church and the village could be an opportunity to demonstrate the Good News of the love of God, which includes using the building for community events. A proliferation of voices, reflecting the diversity of people and experiences represented in the church community has the potential to bear witness to the accessibility and applicability of the gospel. Natural conversations and opportunities for discussions about faith can occur within the framework of trusting friendships as people respond to spiritual questions. However, my fieldwork highlighted limitations in knowledge and experience among church members and office bearers which impact their ability to effectively engage with proclaiming the gospel. Therefore, evangelism or public witness depends upon teaching and discipleship as a foundation for incarnational mission and ministry.

8.4.2 Teaching and Discipling

The second mark of mission is ‘to teach, baptise and nurture new believers.’ In light of my experiences with rural parish churches, the evidence suggests the distinction around ‘new believers’ may be unhelpful within rural parish churches. As Alan Billings and David Walker observe, there is a complicated relationship between belonging and believing in parish churches.⁴⁷³ When I began my fieldwork, I was shocked and saddened at the evidence of high levels of biblical and theological illiteracy among church members. In many cases, the

⁴⁷³ Billings, *Lost Church*, pp. xi-xv; Walker, *God’s Belongers*, pp. 78-91.

people who articulated their lack of understanding of theological concepts or ideas had been church members for 40+ years and did not consider themselves to be ‘new believers’. Many were self-conscious about their limited knowledge, admitting to having questions in the course of private conversations with me or a small group, but unwilling to approach the minister.⁴⁷⁴ They demonstrated experienced or affiliative faith, but few had progressed to a more searching or owned faith.⁴⁷⁵ As a result, they were ill-equipped to engage in mission.

If local churches embrace a calling to incarnational participation in the *missio Dei*, founded in worship and an encounter with God, I suggest they should also invest in training and discipling churchgoers.⁴⁷⁶ Churches should begin with the basics of the Christian faith, providing opportunities for church members and elders to become more familiar with the Bible and more confident in sharing their knowledge. However, a rural approach to discipleship among churches needs to move beyond courses or formal training, although such teaching is important in providing foundational knowledge. Many years ago, a youth pastor of mine described discipleship as ‘doing life together’, which implies incarnationality.⁴⁷⁷ It depends on meeting people where they are and walking the road together, learning from each other and growing together. It is about building relationships, investing in people, providing instruction, support and encouragement and finally, letting go so that others can continue the work.⁴⁷⁸ This would enable churches to transition from a position of minister-dependency to ‘whole church’ ministry that involves every member. While there was limited evidence of such growth in Braedubh and Riverglebe, Ellieneuk and Freshfield demonstrated the benefits of investing in training and discipleship.

⁴⁷⁴ This may also reflect an unspoken desire to belong and fear of being discovered as an imposter, a phenomenon first identified as Imposter Syndrome by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978. P. R. Clance and S. A. Imes, ‘The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention’, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* 15, no. 3, (1978), pp. 241–47.

⁴⁷⁵ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, pp. 89–99.

⁴⁷⁶ Methodist Church of Great Britain et al., *A Discipling Presence*, pp. 40–44.

⁴⁷⁷ There are parallels in Sam Wells’ approach to ‘*being with*’ churches and the world. Wells, *Incarnational Mission*, pp. 9–24; Wells, *Incarnational Ministry*, pp. 7–23.

⁴⁷⁸ Martin, ‘Discipleship, Nurture and Training’, p. 63; Jill Hopkinson, ‘Multi-Church Ministry’, in *Resourcing Rural Ministry: Practical Insights for Mission*, ed. Jill Hopkinson, (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2015), pp. 41–62, at p. 54.

During my fieldwork I witnessed the effectiveness of a personal approach to eldership training in Ellieneuk as the interim moderator developed a learning community through teaching, discussion, sharing meals together and growing together in knowledge and confidence. It was time-limited, reflected the needs of the church, prioritised personal investment, encouraged active participation and provided specific outcomes or goals in the form of equipping and ordaining new elders. The end result was a team of elders who had shared in the journey of gaining knowledge for the purpose of sharing that knowledge with others. Within the wider context of Ellieneuk, this pattern was repeated as people were invited to participate in leading services, contributing to mission initiatives and actively engaging in learning as they grew in their faith and confidence. By prioritising contextualised discipleship training, Ellieneuk equipped and released their members to serve their local communities and engage in evangelism.

8.4.3 Loving Service

The third mark of mission, ‘to respond to human need by loving service’, presupposes a level of contextual and relational awareness to identify opportunities to serve people. Meeting the needs of people means walking alongside them and sharing in their burdens. In many rural areas in Scotland, this occurs naturally. Small rural parish churches are ideally situated for personal engagement with the social needs of local communities, living lives of faithful service in accordance with the *missio Dei*. Each church member operates in a sphere of social influence and network of relationships that contributes to the tapestry of village life. As small rural churches invest in equipping their members to engage missionally with their neighbours, they have opportunities to identify and respond to the needs of their community.

The 2020 GRA:CE report *Growing Good* explores the links between social action and church growth, concluding that churches that actively prioritise local presence and involvement, investing in relationships and practical service, are ‘more likely to grow.’⁴⁷⁹ For generations local parish churches have fulfilled a key role in providing care and support for people in need. I found evidence of

⁴⁷⁹ Hannah Rich, *Growing Good: Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England*, (London: THEOS, 2020), p. 12.

social care provision in the historical records and minute books from Riverglebe. Although patchy, the church accounts of the period from 1890 to 1921 include reports of coal and flour being provided to widows or vulnerable people alongside pastoral visits, illustrating the importance of practical care as well as social or pastoral support. During COVID-19 restrictions, Braedubh parish church formed a resilience group with Northfield, Messy Church and several community groups to ensure that vulnerable residents had food, medication, transport to medical appointments and other necessities. They circulated a leaflet with contact details for those willing to provide pastoral care, including the minister and elders, and developed a list of people with additional support needs. The group mobilised within days of the March 2020 lockdown announcement, recognising the need to care for local people in tangible, practical ways as well as providing pastoral care and support for isolated individuals. As the months passed, a fully stocked community larder opened, ensuring access to food for those in financial difficulties. A community exchange provided a place for people to share books, games, films and toys, encouraging the community to participate in caring for each other. Adopting an incarnational approach to loving service meant the churches were able to recognise the particular contextual needs of Braedubh and the surrounding area and respond in the moment.

These types of initiatives demonstrate the inherent capacity of rural parish churches to be intentionally *present*. As I discovered during my fieldwork, Braedubh and Riverglebe were unfamiliar with the language of discernment and uncertain about seeing God's action in their local area. In order for them to be effective, it is important to ask church members to stop and reflect on the *missio Dei* or identify ways in which they might participate in what God is already doing with people and places. I suggest that churches should invest in actively examining their role in the local village or region as part of their mission. An ongoing process of action and reflection would provide perspective on their *existing* involvement in the local community while influencing their *future* development.⁴⁸⁰ I suggest this should be embedded in every aspect of the

⁴⁸⁰ This approach is widely supported. Green, *Let's Do Theology*, pp. 17–38; Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, pp. 49–60; Chew, Ireland, and Banbury, *How to Do Mission Action Planning*, pp. 15–59; Paul Sparks, Tim Sorens, and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish*:

church's interactions with their local context, but particularly for things which are associated with the third, fourth and fifth of the Five Marks of Mission.

8.4.4 Seeking *Shalom*

The fourth mark is 'to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation'. This corresponds with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (HB/OT) concept of *shalom*. In Jeremiah 29:5-7, the Israelites were told to build houses, plant gardens, raise families and seek *shalom* in the places they lived.⁴⁸¹ In rural parish churches, this includes their involvement in the local community and beyond in a variety of ways from expressing solidarity with the marginalised in rural areas and protesting the reduction of public services to supporting local businesses and facilitating reconciliation between people or groups. This requires intentional engagement with the *missio Dei* as congregations and individuals demonstrate the love of God in their particular context. Social action is part of the *missio Dei* and seeking to establish the Kingdom of God in the world. Churches which are focused on maintenance, either in terms of buildings or traditions, are likely to be overwhelmed and unable to see opportunities for loving their communities.

In a time when many rural areas have lost local shops, schools, regular bus services, banks, post offices, small businesses and medical practices, churches are often the only remaining representatives of a national organisation. In association with the Church of Scotland as a national church, rural parish churches can fulfil an important role in advocacy for rural areas, as well as meeting immediate local needs. There is a perception among those living in rural areas that their voices are not heard and the most vulnerable people in rural areas are often those who are unable or unlikely to advocate for themselves.

One of the most significant challenges facing rural communities is the loss of local services and infrastructure. During my fieldwork the Royal Bank of

How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), pp. 117–33.

⁴⁸¹ This instruction was given in the context of exile, reminding the Israelites to be content in their present places rather than continuing to look longingly at the past and their former glory. As such it has interesting parallels with the experience and perspectives of rural parish churches.

Scotland closed regional branches in my local area and reduced the circulation of the mobile bank van to one 25-minute stop per week in Braedubh and a 15-minute stop in Riverglebe. This put added administrative pressure on local businesses and local people who were forced to change their ways of banking. For older members of the community without computers or internet access, this created fear and anxiety about managing their pensions or regular banking. In some areas the broadband was extremely unreliable, frequently losing connection in the middle of a transaction. The local churches and local presbytery wrote to the bank articulating their concerns and appealing for consideration on behalf of rural communities. Although their letters received cursory replies, their public stand demonstrated the willingness of rural parish churches to speak on behalf of those who were marginalised and disadvantaged.

In addition to solidarity and the pursuit of justice, the fourth mark involves reconciliation. Rural areas are often fragmented and fractured by divisions, like those I witnessed in Braedubh and Riverglebe. Churches can be active or unwitting participants in a culture of gossip and isolation, or they can offer a different example where churches and individuals work together and facilitate safe spaces for clear communication. For both Braedubh and Riverglebe, the work of reconciliation needed to start within the church, finding ways of mediating between people with different expectations; however, it should not stop there. My fieldwork suggests there are opportunities for rural parish churches to be agents of peace and reconciliation in their local areas, between groups and organisations as well as between individuals. Initiatives such as the Joint Churches gathering or Riverglebe Village Events provided occasions for people to get to know each other and engage in building relationships across social groups. The calling of parish churches to engage in embodying Christian mission and ministry to a geographical area naturally encompasses people from different backgrounds with different political, social or economic interests and affiliations.⁴⁸²

In Riverglebe, one ‘safe space’ for reconciliation was the community choir. Although it was not conceived as a project for facilitating connections between different groups, it was part of a larger movement aiming to ‘restore the heart’

⁴⁸² Billings, *Lost Church*, pp. 122-29.

of the village. As Riverglebe Village Events developed, there were opportunities to facilitate connections between people as they worked together on committees, attended events, sang in the choir or passed each other on the street. Although it was not considered ‘missional’ by the church members involved, each gathering contributed to developing healthy relationships and a sense of shared identity in the village. The resulting sense of belonging contributed to the success of activities and events as people worked together and navigated expectations.

Rural churches have an opportunity, and mandate, to bear witness to a God who cares about the marginalised and oppressed in their immediate contexts; however, this is not possible without committing to participating in the *missio Dei* and approaching people with love. Churches and church members are *already* active in their villages. Taking time to engage in theological reflection would give them opportunities to examine their priorities and consider the possibilities of pursuing peace and reconciliation in their local contexts. If social action on behalf of the voiceless were to be combined with clear training and discipleship on the theological foundations of justice, mercy and faithfulness in Micah 6:8 and Zechariah 7:9, it would bridge the perceived gap between ‘church’ on a Sunday and the everyday life of churchgoers as Christian witnesses.

8.4.5 Caring for Creation

The specific wording of the fifth mark, ‘to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth’, is global and all-encompassing, while reflecting the values of many rural church members and rural communities. Although the trajectory of rural life was moving away from agriculture as the primary focus for Border villages, there was an inherited tradition of appreciation and care for created life. During my fieldwork I witnessed people demonstrating care for creation in their everyday lives from caring for their gardens to walking their dogs. People regularly discussed the implications of global warming, the ethical complications of conglomerate ‘forced’ beef companies and the importance of sustainable resources. In Riverglebe, the annual horticultural show was a highlight of the year as people brought their efforts together in a celebration of growing things.

The church in Braedubh provided a place for sharing gardening skills between generations as older members of the church and community taught children how to plant flowers and how to weed the Messy Church garden in the churchyard. As a result, children learned to respect flowers, sharing in the pride of ownership of ‘their’ garden. In Riverglebe, wildflowers and grasses in the churchyard were allowed to grow as a haven for bugs and small animals. A local beekeeper (and church member) offered to tend a hive in a far corner of the grounds to encourage bees. Signs on the gates spoke about the importance of encouraging pollinators and local primary school classes were invited to explore the church grounds to develop an appreciation for the flora and fauna of their local village. Both churches made space for children, and adults, to encounter the outworking of God’s love in creation. As a result, the churches affirmed the sanctity of creation.

For many rural congregations, the importance of caring for creation is a natural extension of their contextual experience. Church members were actively involved in continuing traditions of caring for the land and for creatures. Many were committed to supporting sustainable food and energy sources, joining with members of the community in protesting the practices of conglomerate factories and large scale forced beef farms or chicken farms with poor reputations. Others discussed the carbon footprint of the church and proposals for alternate energy sources. Although there were few opportunities for explicit connections with a Christian theology of creation care, such as that advocated by Chris Wright, rural parish churches are well placed to bear witness to a God who created everything and entrusted it to the care of humanity.⁴⁸³ Reflecting on the call to participate in the *missio Dei* and be holistic, embodied witnesses in their local environments would enrich their ability to engage in contextually appropriate mission and ministry. By uniting present practices with Christian theological teaching and reflection, the church could be mobilised in rural areas to champion the sanctity of creation.

⁴⁸³ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, pp. 48–62; Wright, *The Mission of God*, pp. 397–420.

8.5 Summary: Defining Rural Missiology

Over the course of my fieldwork and writing, I have been convinced that it is essential for rural parish churches to recognise their unique calling and capacity to engage relationally with those in their local contexts. Further, I am convinced that rural parish churches are at the forefront of mission in Scotland. I suggest their greatest potential lies in encouraging, equipping and releasing their members to be missional witnesses in their everyday lives. While this is still an aspirational goal, a practical rural missiology for rural parish churches in Scotland is one where they seek to join in God's mission as the incarnational embodied representation of the *missio Dei* in their geographical area.⁴⁸⁴

As my fieldwork demonstrated, rural parish churches are embedded in their communities as part of the village story and structure. Their buildings are used for services and community events. Their members are involved in village activities, clubs, sports groups, shops, and neighbourhoods. They are present as a result of proximity, but they can, and should, engage in being intentionally *present* as embodied witnesses in their geographical and sociological contexts.⁴⁸⁵ Small rural churches have the potential to become dynamic and transformative communities, shaped by the gifts and abilities of individual people in response to the needs and opportunities presented by their local contexts. They are ideally positioned to embrace intentionally missional and contextual approaches to 'being' local parish churches, engaging with local people and living with them in community. However, many rural parish churches are under-resourced and focused primarily on maintaining recognisable and traditional forms of 'ministry', leaving them with little time or energy to explore creative approaches to mission. Despite these limitations, rural churches could be assets rather than liabilities for presbyteries if they were encouraged to embrace a missional identity and given the freedom to be creative and messy.⁴⁸⁶

In this chapter I have focused on the missional calling and purpose for churches in rural areas. I have argued that rural parish churches are called to be holistic,

⁴⁸⁴ Billings, *Lost Church*, 124-28.

⁴⁸⁵ This reflects the conversation about recovering a parish identity found in *The New Parish*. Sparks, Sorens, and Friesen, *The New Parish*, pp. 53-74, 133-49.

⁴⁸⁶ Aisthorpe, *Rewilding the Church*, pp. 7-27.

embodied representatives of the *missio Dei* in rural areas. I proposed that mission should be rooted in vibrant and authentic expressions of corporate worship which act as a means of reorienting our focus on the One who calls and equips the Church for mission. By using the Five Marks of Mission as a framework for critical reflection I have argued that rural mission can, and should, involve public witness, training & discipleship, loving service, seeking *shalom* and caring for creation. I have used examples from my fieldwork to suggest that it is within the nature of rural parish churches to adopt a holistic approach to mission as embodied and visible presences in their villages.

In Chapter 2 I introduced my working definition of rural theology:

Rural Theology is a mode of practical theology with particular geographically related missional and contextual concerns. It encompasses both critical theological reflection on the practices of the Church in rural contexts and theological reflection on any and all aspects of those contexts with a view to influencing practice and supporting Christian mission and ministry in rural areas.

In parallel with my working definition of Rural Theology, I offer a working definition of Rural Missiology:

A Rural Missiology affirms the calling of the Church to engage in holistic, embodied, creative missional practice and worship in rural contexts, participating in the missio Dei for the sake of God's Kingdom.

In my final chapter I present seven recommendations from my research and explore the possibilities for change in Braedubh, Riverglebe, Crossbrae Presbytery and beyond. I focus on missional calling and identity, encouraging rural parish churches to be transformational and incarnational as they engage with God's mission in their local contexts.

Chapter 9 Prophetic Practice: Applying a Rural Missiology in Scotland

5-8-2020

“The window of opportunity is closing”

When these words came to mind this morning there was a corresponding sinking feeling in my heart and mind. The window of opportunity is indeed closing. Time is short and yet, it is so much easier to spend the time doing other things instead of addressing the big things and responding well.

What does it look like to take the opportunity when it is available? What decisions need to be made NOW to ensure that a future is possible? What actions need to be taken NOW in obedience to the call?

When I reflect on the churches I have lived with, I recognise a sense of apathy and aimlessness. There was a lack of urgency which was partly the result of uncertainty and poorly defined purposes or goals. Was church participation something that accomplished anything or was it simply something to do on a Sunday to mark the passage of time?

Much of the energy and focus of church members was on the past, holding onto the forms and structures that guided the church through the years to this point. The other part of their energy was spent on talking about what the future might hold and what might be done, without thinking about the big picture. Rather than taking action, I heard people talk about possibilities until they were overwhelmed by all of the potential obstacles and barriers and NOTHING HAPPENED!

It is paralysing and exhausting to consider all of the possible options without taking action on any of them. A choice or plan may not end well, resulting in some bumps and bruises, but at least something will have happened! There will be lessons that can be learned and applied in the next opportunity.

As my thesis has demonstrated, the current model of mission and ministry in rural Scottish parish churches is unsustainable. As discussed in chapter 7, the current model of mission and ministry in Braedubh and Riverglebe relies on dwindling resources, both human and financial, and is overly dependent upon ordained clergy, either stipendiary or retired. Both churches have been isolated

and inward-looking, lacking a sense of purpose or vision and unable to see beyond maintaining current forms and traditions. Both churches are burdened by deteriorating or inaccessible buildings, limiting their capacity to be places of encounter for the entire parish. However, alongside statistical or material evidence of unsustainability, there is hope for both churches as they, and the presbytery at large, explore possibilities for renewal and revitalisation. Building a sustainable future for mission and ministry in rural parish churches should involve a process of reflection, review, revision and renewal.

A sustainable and creative future *is* possible but requires change. To that end I have proposed a rural missiology that builds on the framework of the Five Marks of Mission, as they apply in a Scottish context. Having proposed an incarnational approach to mission for rural parish churches, I now discuss the six recommendations I presented to Crossbrae Presbytery at the conclusion of my research, adding a seventh as I consider the implications for the Church of Scotland as a whole. They are:

1. Pursuing God: Actively seeking God's presence, inspiration, direction and provision.
2. Restoring Purpose in Mission: Recovering an understanding of the *missio Dei*.
3. Seasons of Change: Appreciating the seasonality of forms and models of ministry and practice.
4. Transformational Discipleship: Building communities where people are intentionally encouraged to grow in faith and service.
5. Collaboration: Investing in collaborative ministry teams within churches.
6. Embracing 'Parish': Exploring opportunities for missional engagement with local people and places.
7. Reimagining Rural Scottish Parish Ministry: Celebrating small rural churches and actively supporting local, contextual, creative, collaborative, holistic and embodied parish ministry.

In discussing these recommendations, I acknowledge they are based on well-established practices which have been applied elsewhere and reframe them in the context of my fieldwork experiences with Braedubh and Riverglebe. By working from the lived reality of these churches as representatives of the

‘concrete church’, I am engaging with Nicholas Healy’s proposal of ‘practical-prophetic reflection’ that informs future action by challenging parish churches to reorient themselves in pursuing their calling.⁴⁸⁷

9.1 Pursuing God

The theological foundation for mission and ministry in local churches stems from encountering God, who is both present and active in the world.⁴⁸⁸ Realising the purpose of churches to engage in the *missio Dei* requires actively seeking God’s inspiration, direction, vision and provision through Biblical and theological research, reflection, prayer, meditation and fellowship. The Church of Scotland is rooted in theological principles of God’s sovereignty and a call to discernment. As such, it follows that churches should prioritise time in prayer and theological reflection as the foundation for action. Encountering God’s love and transformative power provides the motivating force for effective engagement with the *missio Dei*.

My fieldwork suggests that a superficial understanding of the gospel and the importance of God’s work in the world has undermined the capacity of rural churches to engage in intentional Christian witness in their local areas. As Chris Wright highlights,

We must also insist that ‘the gospel’ is not merely a personal insurance plan, a ticket to heaven, but is rather the declaration of the whole-Bible story of salvation—the cosmic story of God’s redemptive purpose for the whole creation, promised in the Old Testament and accomplished by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁴⁸⁹

It is not a ‘cheap grace’ and should, therefore, impact every aspect of the life and witness of those who claim to be Christians.⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁷ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, p. 185.

⁴⁸⁸ Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, pp. 53-54.

⁴⁸⁹ Wright, *Five Marks of Mission*, p. 16.

⁴⁹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, SCM Classics, (London: SCM Press, 1959), pp. 3–14. Guder observes that much of the evangelism found in the ‘Western’ world extols a form of ‘cheap grace’ that is superficial at best, based in the assumptions and attitudes of Christendom. Although Guder is focused on a North American context there are some parallels with rural Scottish churches. Guder, *Called to Witness*, pp. 70–77.

In Alan Smith's *God-Shaped Mission*, he argues that Christians, and the church in general, must prioritise experiencing God because it is out of that encounter with God's love that we find the impetus to engage in mission.⁴⁹¹ However, the practice of corporate discernment, reflection and prayer was little evident in the daily life of the churches I lived alongside in the Borders. For many church members in Braedubh and Riverglebe, the idea of gathering to pray for God's direction was antithetical to their experience. There was an unspoken assumption that the minister was responsible for the spiritual direction of the church and that included prayer, but there was little requirement for church members to participate. As my fieldwork demonstrated, many church members struggle with conversations about faith, making it more difficult to encourage participation in corporate discernment or prayer. As a result, there is a lack of opportunity for asking the question, 'Where is God at work in the world?'

This question is the foundation of the *missio Dei* and an extension of God's character and being. Therefore, for rural churches to effectively embody God's love and bear witness to the transformative power of the gospel, they must prioritise spending time with God. If the people who are part of these churches believe God is at work, they are more likely to actively participate in mission and ministry in their local area. Likewise, churches that are focused on continually seeking God's presence and direction rather than relying on prevailing wisdom or circumstances are healthier overall.⁴⁹²

9.2 Restoring Purpose in Mission

The future of rural parish churches in Scotland is linked to restoring a sense of purpose in mission and ministry. As discussed in chapter 8, rural churches are called to participate in the *missio Dei*, bearing incarnational witness to the love of God in a particular context. However, in practice, local rural churches such as Braedubh and Riverglebe were preoccupied with immediate concerns and practical challenges. Braedubh church was predominantly concerned with maintenance, focusing on the challenges of regular Sunday services and keeping the building open. Riverglebe was more amenable to engaging with the

⁴⁹¹ Smith, *God-Shaped Mission*, p. 54.

⁴⁹² Warren, *Healthy Churches' Handbook*, pp. 26-27.

community because they had the financial resources to maintain or update the building as necessary, but there had been little opportunity to engage with the missiological foundations of being a church. Conversations about new initiatives or changes in both churches were fixated on plans and resource management rather than an overarching purpose or goal.

Short-term initiatives such as Riverglebe Village Events are primarily focused on developing social networks or increasing community involvement. While this is a laudable goal, it does not reflect the role and calling of Christian churches to share the good news of God's love and grace. As such, they have a limited impact when evaluated against the Five Marks of Mission. They may facilitate contact with the church and provide opportunities for missional engagement through pastoral care and relationships, but they should not be treated as the primary purpose or goal for churches.

Likewise, the purpose of mission is not to attract more people to attend Sunday services. One of the primary challenges for Messy Church and Freshfield was their sense of alienation from the parish church congregations in their respective villages. Both considered themselves to be ecclesial communities and served a particular group of people who were unlikely to join in the parish church congregation. Navigating expectations between the traditional inherited model of church and these Fresh Expressions was helped by asking members of the parish churches, Messy Church and Freshfield to spend time together during the Joint Churches gatherings as they reflected on where God might be at work in their local area. Changing the narrative from one of competition to one of collaboration in realising the *missio Dei* in the local area gave members of each church an opportunity to appreciate their uniqueness.

Unity with other Christians in sharing God's love and working for God's Kingdom not only encourages those in the church but also demonstrates a healthy witness to the wider community who do not distinguish between denominations or expressions of church.⁴⁹³ Seeking *shalom* in the local parish includes reconciliation between Christian groups. Affirming participation in the *missio Dei* has the potential to facilitate this reconciliation as churches see the benefit

⁴⁹³ Methodist Church of Great Britain et al., *A Discipling Presence*, p. 25.

of encouraging people to grow in faith and discipleship regardless of their church connection or association.

Restoring a sense of purpose in mission has the potential to inspire local churches and reinvigorate them. As churches refocus on God, they will be able to assess their current practices and priorities.⁴⁹⁴ For churches such as Braedubh and Riverglebe, this includes addressing the ‘aye been’ traditions and reflecting on their purpose. If the traditions continue to further the *missio Dei* and enable the churches to engage in holistic, embodied missional engagement with local people and places, it may be wise to keep them. If, however, they hinder that engagement or they are no longer consistent with the church’s missional identity, they should be reviewed and revised or brought to an end.⁴⁹⁵ As my research demonstrated, ministry and mission in rural areas should be contextually appropriate, adapting to local people and places without compromising the theological foundations of the gospel.

9.3 Seasons of Change

An ongoing process of reflection and revision is essential for the future of mission and ministry in rural parish churches. Rural churches and communities are blessed with an awareness of the seasons of life and change, from planting to harvest, lambing to butchering, height of summer to dead of winter. The rhythms of life in the surrounding countryside have a direct influence on the way people think, feel and act on a daily basis. The seasonality of the world serves as a reminder of the importance of change and adaptation. I propose that churches embrace a seasonal approach to implementing change, taking time to review, reflect and evaluate new and existing ways of engaging in mission and ministry.⁴⁹⁶

For churches that have become mired in ‘aye been’ it is difficult to consider change. My fieldwork experiences suggested that much of the fear about change or trying new things appeared to be centred on the possibility that the proposed

⁴⁹⁴ Warren, *Healthy Churches’ Handbook*, pp. 29-30.

⁴⁹⁵ Cf. Elford, *Creating the Future*, pp. 21-25.

⁴⁹⁶ Cf. Warren, *Healthy Churches’ Handbook*, pp. 31-35.

change would be permanent. Discussions around new ideas indicated a trial period was preferable, with a plan for reviewing and evaluating the activity or event and assessing its strengths and weaknesses before making a final decision. Members of Braedubh and Riverglebe felt more confident about taking risks or trying new and creative things for a season, exploring options and having the freedom to fail. Likewise, giving church congregations and individuals permission to adapt to changing circumstances and seasons by letting go of existing duties can reduce the burden of trying to maintain forms or traditions.

While introducing new things is part of embracing seasonality, it is essential for churches to let go of forms, traditions or practices which are no longer fulfilling their purpose. If, through a process of reflection and evaluation, there are things which are deemed unsuitable, they should be stopped; however, this can be traumatising for those who are deeply invested particular features of church life, practice or places. It may be necessary for church leaders to facilitate a process of grieving, acknowledging past history and personal associations while looking ahead to the future. Such an approach would have been advisable for the Kingriver congregation when their building was closed and they were united with Riverglebe. Instead, many church members felt their story and identity was lost in uncertainty and poor communication about the future of their 'place' in Kingriver. Handling transition well requires sensitivity, investing in relationships, communication and understanding the context.

A seasonal approach may also allow for old forms and traditions to be resurrected or reinvented. Reintroducing tea and coffee in Braedubh transformed social interactions within the church community but it had been unsuccessful in previous years. A simple change of timing, serving people before the service rather than after, along with sharing the responsibility of preparing and clearing made a significant difference. More dramatically, the Riverglebe Gala was successfully resurrected after fifteen years. It had a clearly defined purpose of bringing the community together and was well supported by a team of people. In both cases, it was a contextually appropriate season for returning to a former tradition.

9.4 Transformational Discipleship

In order for mission and ministry in rural parish churches to be sustainable, there needs to be an intentional commitment to discipleship. In order for people to engage in holistic, embodied, creative missional practice, they need to know their faith and live it out in daily life. A core feature of the Fresh Expressions movement is building transformational witnessing communities where people are discipled and lives are changed.⁴⁹⁷ The Methodist Church and United Reformed Church in the UK focus on discipleship as the key element for promoting and sustaining a Christian presence in rural areas.⁴⁹⁸ Discipleship should also be a priority in rural parish churches in Scotland.

Rural parish churches are ideally positioned for contextualised adult Christian discipleship that reflects the current situation and individual circumstances of the people and communities involved. The purpose of discipleship is about training and equipping people to live out a life of faith, which is best done in community. For Braedubh and Riverglebe where there was evidence of experienced or affiliative faith and a strong sense of belonging to the church there was little demonstrable evidence of a desire for formal teaching or training. Instead, I discovered opportunities to respond to questions about the Bible or Christian faith in the course of my everyday life. For several people, their lack of confidence or willingness to engage in questions about spiritual matters betrayed a fear of revealing their lack of knowledge. One individual confessed [their] reluctance to ask questions in a group context because [they] felt they *should* know the answers after being in church for so many years. Rather than a formal discipleship programme, these individuals would have benefitted from a church culture that invested in exploring questions of faith and application. I suggest that rural churches do not need more resources; rather, they need training, support and guidance in using existing resources well in rural contexts.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁷ Cf. Moynagh, *Being Church*, p. 180-235.

⁴⁹⁸ Methodist Church of Great Britain et al., *A Discipling Presence*, pp. 40-44.

⁴⁹⁹ Martin, 'Discipleship, Nurture and Training', pp. 63-84.

Messy Church offers an approach to discipleship in its basic structure. Messy Church allows, and encourages, team participation, informal conversations around shared activities and opportunities for engaging with the gospel message through creative expression and practical involvement. Biblical teaching involves questions, inviting listeners to respond and reinforcing the message with immediate application in creative ways.⁵⁰⁰ This style of interactive discussion within the context of relational engagement encourages people to explore questions of faith. In the Braedubh Messy Church, children and young people were eager to ask questions, often raising points that parents or parish church members struggled to answer, encouraging everyone to reflect on their understanding of particular issues.

Investing in training and equipping local people to share with their neighbours increases the effectiveness of the church and has the potential to create transformational communities that are both active and attractive. David Robertson observes that people who see themselves as disciples are more likely to take an active role in helping others find and grow in faith, expecting to *share* in ministry rather than simply *receive* ministry.⁵⁰¹ This was the approach taken by the interim moderator at Ellieneuk, who acted as a mentor for a group of people exploring what it meant to be elders in the Church of Scotland. Over a period of months individuals developed confidence and were given opportunities to lead worship and develop initiatives. Ellieneuk's interim moderator applied a cycle of training, action and reflection which invigorated the whole congregation as people shared what they were learning with each other.⁵⁰² As a result, Ellieneuk became an attractive community of faith, drawing people in from across parish boundaries who wanted to learn more and grow as disciples.

⁵⁰⁰ Church Army's Research Unit and Claire Dalpra, 'Playfully Serious: How Messy Churches Create New Space for Faith', (Sheffield: Church Army, January 2019), p. 8; Church Army's Research Unit, 'What Goes On Inside', Playfully Serious, (Sheffield: Church Army, February 2019), pp. 5–6.

⁵⁰¹ David Robertson, *Collaborative Ministry: What It Is, How It Works and Why*, (Ossett: Parbar Publishing, 2016), pp. 227–28.

⁵⁰² Cf. Methodist Church of Great Britain et al., *A Discipling Presence*, pp. 40–44.

9.5 Collaboration

As multi-church linkages become more common, collaboration will be more important for ensuring consistent Christian witness in rural areas.⁵⁰³ The Church of Scotland needs to continue learning from the Anglican communion, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church in supporting ministries of accompaniment: recruiting trainers or facilitators act as enablers, mentoring people through the journey of developing as teams and offering contextually appropriate training that encourages participants to recognise and embrace their gifts. Within Crossbrae Presbytery there were discussions about adopting a team approach with a small group of stipendiary clergy overseeing local teams of elders and church members in each of the churches in the presbytery. For this type of plan to be effective, it will require intentional, and likely intensive, work to facilitate collaboration, dismantling the existing mindset of minister dependency and facilitating the development of appropriate training and oversight.⁵⁰⁴

As demonstrated above, the existing model of dependency upon a sole member of clergy is unsustainable. This is true for any church, whether rural, urban or suburban. The logical alternative involves developing and training ministry teams of local people so they are equipped to engage missionally with their context, responding to the needs of their communities as holistic, embodied representations of God's love and power.⁵⁰⁵ As already stated, there is a paucity of training for elders and there has been a systemic failure to implement or maintain adult Christian education in local churches.⁵⁰⁶ This limits the potential impact of parish churches in all aspects of mission and ministry, particularly those which correspond to the first three of the Five Marks of Mission. I suggest that rural parish churches would benefit from considering their parishes as mission fields and learning from the examples of international missions about the importance of developing leaders rather than followers, breaking the cycle

⁵⁰³ Clark, 'An Effective Christian Presence', pp. 102-11.

⁵⁰⁴ Neil Burgess, 'Collaborative Ministry in Rural Areas', *Rural Theology* 14, no. 2, (2 July 2016), pp. 134-45; Grundy, *Multi-Congregation Ministry*, pp. 74-104.

⁵⁰⁵ Methodist Church of Great Britain et al., *A Discipling Presence*, pp. 10-14.

⁵⁰⁶ This is echoed in the Church of England in rural areas. Cf. Rural Affairs Group, 'Released for Mission', pp. 23-24.

of clergy dependency.⁵⁰⁷ Discipleship is a fundamental part of developing and equipping collaborative ministry teams of clergy, elders and church members.

Robert Warren specifically identifies collaborative approaches to being a Christian community as a sign of a healthy church.⁵⁰⁸ In Braedubh and Riverglebe there were few opportunities for collaborative leadership and the overarching focus of ministry was directed by the minister. Both Freshfield and Ellieneuk actively encouraged collaboration in leadership, worship, ministry and mission. By inviting participation, the leaders of both churches fostered a culture of teamwork which benefitted the congregation and the wider community. Rather than adopting the traditional ‘heroic’ style of leadership,⁵⁰⁹ they shared responsibility, allowing others to share the story of the congregation and contribute to its emerging shape.⁵¹⁰ This is essential for ensuring a sustainable future for mission and ministry in rural parish churches.

9.6 Embracing ‘Parish’

Throughout my research I have been engaging with the theological concept and practical realities of the ‘parish’ for local churches. Peter Neilson’s proposal that parish ministry should be the ‘starting place for authentic mission’ in Scotland resonates with my research findings.⁵¹¹ Both Braedubh and Riverglebe were comprised of people who had some form of attachment to the parish church, either through attending, believing or belonging.⁵¹² Adopting an incarnational missiology within the place of the parish invites churches to intentionally engage with people of all backgrounds, walking alongside them through life and demonstrating God’s love as part of the *missio Dei*.⁵¹³ This

⁵⁰⁷ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1994), pp. 173–75; Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St Paul’s or Ours*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 81.

⁵⁰⁸ Warren, *Healthy Churches’ Handbook*, pp. 36–40.

⁵⁰⁹ Grundy, *Multi-Congregation Ministry*, p. 83.

⁵¹⁰ Roberts and Sims, *Leading by Story*, pp. 197–99

⁵¹¹ Neilson, *Church on the Move*, p. 48.

⁵¹² Billings, *Lost Church*, pp. xiv–xv; Walker, ‘Belonging’, pp. 90–96.

⁵¹³ Wells, *Incarnational Mission*, pp. 19–24.

includes those of all faiths and none, recognising that each is a contributing member of the parish as a geographical and conceptual place.⁵¹⁴

Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank's impassioned plea for retaining parish churches echoes the sentiment I found within my case study villages and my experience of rural communities throughout Scotland:

At a time when our localities are being stripped of their post offices, pubs and local shops, it would be cruel and ungenerous to abandon our parish churches and the commitment and solidarity they embody.⁵¹⁵

For Braedubh and Riverglebe, the church buildings represented a place of encounter for the community despite their impracticalities. Both buildings required considerable work to make them accessible and fit for purpose; however, they also formed an important part of the narrative of their respective villages. Choosing to capitalise on the building as a resource for engaging with the people of the village created opportunities for missional encounters in Riverglebe through the community choir and other events.⁵¹⁶

While the average attendance at Sunday services in Riverglebe was not materially affected, the impact of intentional contact with the community was significant in changing perceptions of the church as a Christian witness in the village. In light of this, I suggest that it is time for the Church of Scotland to include factors such as community engagement, potential for mission and significance in the socio-historical and cultural context of the local area in addition to church attendance when assessing the viability of local parish churches. The Church of Scotland 'Statistics for Mission' prepared using census data from 2011 offer a detailed summary of the people living within parish boundaries, offering some perspective on the importance of 'parish' among

⁵¹⁴ Billings, *Secular Lives*, pp. 120-24.

⁵¹⁵ Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, p. 155.

⁵¹⁶ Methodist Church of Great Britain et al., *A Discipling Presence*, pp. 33-36.

respondents who identify themselves as ‘Church of Scotland’ despite not attending regularly.⁵¹⁷

Alan Billings’ book *Secular Lives, Sacred Hearts*, affirms the calling of parish churches to be fully engaged with the place and people who reside within their geographical area.⁵¹⁸ As he notes, the move away from the ‘institutional life of the Church is not necessarily a sign that the Christian faith has been repudiated’ and among those who do not engage with the institutional church regularly, ‘asking for ministry is more than just “residual Christianity”’.⁵¹⁹ For local parish churches, continuing involvement in the lives of community members past and present is often linked to rites of passage and life events. Each has the potential to be a significant moment of encounter between God, the Christian community and local people.⁵²⁰

Local rural parish churches are ideally positioned to share in the lives of people across socio-economic, cultural and generational groups. Embracing their identity as parish churches has the potential to give them opportunities to fulfil their calling to be embodied witnesses and participants in the *missio Dei*. Each parish church has a unique story that is constantly changing in response to the local context and the people who identify themselves with the church.

9.7 Reimagining Rural Scottish Parish Ministry

As my research focuses on the experience of rural churches within the Church of Scotland, I would like to highlight marginalisation within the structure and organisation of the church itself. Rural parish churches, and the Church of Scotland as a whole, need to begin addressing negative perceptions of rural mission and ministry. To borrow a phrase from Jerry Marshall, former CEO of the Arthur Rank Centre for rural ministry, ‘a satsuma is not a failed orange.’⁵²¹ In other words, small rural parish churches are not ‘failures’ because they are

⁵¹⁷ Church of Scotland, ‘Statistics for Mission’, accessed 15 October 2016, <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/resources/stats-for-mission>.

⁵¹⁸ Billings, *Secular Lives*, p. 107-24.

⁵¹⁹ Billings, *Secular Lives*, p. 104.

⁵²⁰ Billings, *Secular Lives*, pp. 8-9.

⁵²¹ First mentioned to me in conversation with Jerry in August 2017 during a visit to the Arthur Rank Centre.

not large urban or suburban churches. The Church of Scotland has been treating rural parish churches as if they were failed oranges, demonstrating a fundamental misunderstanding of their unique identities and potential contributions to the denomination. As a result, rural parish churches have misunderstood themselves. The process of reimagining and reinvigorating rural parish churches involves cultivating satsumas and supporting local, contextual approaches to engaging in creative, collaborative, holistic and embodied mission and ministry. As small rural churches explore their purpose and identity, they can contribute their voice and perspective to other churches, transforming the organisation from the borders by advocating for the local, the personal and the contextual.

During my experience of researching rural parish churches and working with the Church of Scotland, I concluded that rural voices were marginalised to the detriment of the Church of Scotland's witness and missionary calling as a national church. Following the 'Resourcing Rural Churches Roadshow' initiative of 2017 and 2018,⁵²² the Rural Working Group (RWG) prepared proposals for supporting ministry in rural and island parishes by enabling participation in national training, team meetings and committees through video conferencing or provisions for additional travel and accommodation costs. Despite strong evidence of the necessity of 'rural and island proofing' the Church of Scotland, the RWG's proposals were not carried to the floor of General Assembly in 2019. Instead, the RWG was dissolved as part of the reorganisation following General Assembly 2019. As of the time of writing, rural representation within central forums and committees is no longer supported by the work of a part-time staff member in 121 and as a result, there is no official public representation for rural voices at a national level within the Church of Scotland. This raises questions about the extent to which the Church of Scotland can claim to be a 'national' church.

Following the adoption of the Radical Action Plan at GA 2019 discussions began concerning the creation of 'super-presbyteries' to reduce the administrative burden on small presbyteries. It was the stated aim that such presbyteries would reduce the administrative burden on individual people, allowing for skill

⁵²² Cf. Section 4.2.2

sharing and support for local ministries. Reducing the administrative burden on small local presbyteries has the potential to create opportunities for presbyteries to engage in creative collaboration, sharing their stories and providing space for local churches to think about how to respond to their local community. While this is both necessary and laudable, there is a need for presbyteries to engage in training, networking with local congregations and worshipping together to ensure that the voices of small rural churches are not lost or overpowered. Based on my fieldwork experiences, I suggest the formation of super-presbyteries will need to involve significant investment in building relationships and facilitating effective communication between church congregations and working together with other denominations. There are extraordinary initiatives happening at local church levels that could offer insight and encouragement to other churches if they were shared. The Church of Scotland needs to listen to the voice of churches in rural areas and learn from them.

9.8 Summary: Prophetic Rural Mission in Scotland

In this chapter I have presented seven recommendations from my research for realising the potential of a sustainable future for rural mission and ministry in Scotland. I have argued that churches need to begin by refocusing on God, restoring a sense of purpose in mission and recognising the changing seasons of life and ministry in rural areas. I have discussed the importance of transformational discipleship and working together in collaboration. I concluded by arguing that rural parish churches need to embrace the concept of ‘parish’ and engage in incarnational mission within the geographical area.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, my thesis and fieldwork experiences are both relevant and timely. The local and particular lens of living with churches in the Borders has given me a platform for addressing the national situation. Although time-limited and contextual, this chapter illustrates the importance of mission and ministry in rural Scottish parish churches and the potential for the future.

There are difficult decisions to make about the future of rural parish churches. My fieldwork suggests that changing the focus for rural mission and ministry has

the potential to change perceptions of rural churches. There is a future and a hope for churches in rural areas. There are opportunities to embrace and stories to share. The Church of Scotland has an opportunity to redress the imbalance and invest in local, personal and contextual expressions of mission and ministry in rural areas.

Chapter 10 Beyond Borders: A Reflexive Epilogue

25/3/2021

Here I am at the end. When I began this journey I had no idea how messy it would be or how much it would change me. I was unprepared for the challenges and the blessings of living with people and sharing in their lives. I have been entrusted with their stories. They have shaped mine.

*We laughed together and cried together.
We worked together and played together.
We struggled together and celebrated together.*

*When I left the Borders in 2019, I entered a new season and they continued into a new season without me.
I knew my story of life in the Borders would reflect a liminal time.
A betwixt and between place.*

*As I prepare to submit my thesis I look back to where I started.
This is my PhD. This is my life. What does the future hold?*

This chapter represents the culmination of my research and my autoethnographic story of the lives of two rural parish churches in the Scottish Borders. Through the previous chapters I traced my research journey through assembling the *jigsaw* of context, learning to sing as part of the *choir* of the parish, becoming a *compere* and facilitating participation, *telling the story* of present challenges, and bringing together *prophecy and practice* as I developed a rural missiology for Scottish churches. In this chapter I bring together the threads of my thesis as a whole, assessing the value of my research and its contribution to the conversation around rural mission and ministry. I argue that my thesis provides a necessary perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing rural parish churches. I finish my thesis with a call for churches to listen to the voices of rural people in rural places and prioritise local, contextual approaches to mission and ministry.

10.1 A Poetic Reflection and Response

As I draw my thesis to a close, I am reminded of the importance of creative responses to situations and circumstances that seem beyond our control. I wrote

the following poetic lament while I struggled to find words to articulate everything I was feeling at the end of my fieldwork. It follows no consistent pattern, simply voicing my experience and perspective through the ebb and flow of words. The questions and answers, thoughts and phrases trace the development and journey of my research and findings.

A cry from the heart

*Where do I begin?
 With this pain that wraps a cold hand around my heart and
 constricts my chest?
 With the tears that well up in my eyes?
 I feel the weight and depth of hurt.
 People are pushed to the breaking point and beyond.
 I see sadness in their eyes
 as they appeal to me for hope and encouragement.
 I want to help them.
 I want to provide some hope.
 I want to encourage them to consider new things.
 To take risks.
 To step out of the boat.
 But what do I do with my emotions?
 With my sadness?
 With the hurt that I feel?
 The situations I've seen and the experiences I've shared?
 How do I find the words to tell this story?
 Their story.
 My story.
 Our story.*

*How Long O Lord?! Will you forget us forever?
 How long will you ignore what is happening here?
 How long will we feel like no one cares about us?
 How long will we suffer and be overwhelmed?*

*Where are you God?!
 Where are you in this situation?
 Are you still working in this parish?
 Do you care about the people here?*

*For years they have struggled.
 They have felt overwhelmed and discouraged.
 They are tired and despairing about the future.
 They have felt neglected, ignored and abandoned by 'the
 church.'*

*'121 is out to get us.'
 The times I've heard that said...
 'The Presbytery doesn't care.'
 'What will we do now?'
 'Will we ever get a minister?'*

*The children have all gone.
Their parents are gone too.
Who's at fault in that?
Is it a changing society?
Or failure by the church?
Perhaps it's simply 'the way things are these days.'*

*They heave a sigh.
Their shoulders droop.*

*I ask them what the future holds.
We talk of life and work.
The words I use are things I thought should be understood.
After all, this is a church...
Or did I miss something?*

*'My faith impacts my life,' I say.
'I have a role to play.'
'I have a call to mission.
I have a call to serve.
I serve because I know that God has given love
and I should love you too.'*

*They act like they've not heard that yet!
It seems like a surprise.
What have they been taught?!
Why have they not heard the mission of the church is to be
shared?!*

*Unless there is change these churches will close.
This is the reality.
There is no way to ignore the facts.
The buildings are old and falling down.
The people are as well.
They complain of lack of funds but refuse to ask for help.
They want to have more people there, but 'please not in my
pew.'*

*'If we do this, then maybe more will come.'
Did you miss the part where Jesus said to 'go'?
It shouldn't be strange to talk to neighbours and tell them about
God.
But somehow that is left behind in church –
if it was ever there.*

*I meet people in the street.
Or standing in the shop.
I chat with people in the pub,
and setting up marquees.
They ask me what I'm doing here and so I say,
'I'm here because the church needs help to see.'*

*The truth is the church needs help in many different ways.
People, buildings, teaching, time.
Many have lost hope.
They need encouragement.
Some need rest and some need work.
They all need friends.*

*The things that I find hardest here are things I grew up with.
I learned to love and serve the Lord
and love and serve the people too.
I learned my life should be transformed,
but this has not been taught.
Instead, the call is to be there on Sundays,
then go home and live your life.
Don't ask how the Bible might turn your life around,
just go and do your duty.
And remember, 'with a smile.'*

*There is no way to go ahead by keeping things the same.
Transformation comes with a price.
The Bible changes everything.
This is not about an ordered life.
There are no easy rules.*

*I'm frustrated by the lack of care.
The lack of teaching.
The lack of trust.*

*I weep over the hurts and pains.
The cries of 'what about us?'
It hurts because it's true.
I can see the legacy.
They have been neglected.
They have been ignored.
Things have slipped away.*

*The questions I am faced with cause me hurt and stress.
Would it, in fact, be better just to let these churches 'die'?
Is it possible to resuscitate, or better to resurrect?
My heart aches for people that I have come to love.
I have hope that God is working,
and I trust that he is here,
but I cannot see the ending.*

*They ask me for my thoughts.
I am called to give account.
'What is the future here?'
I pause to take a breath,
and breathe a quiet prayer.*

*'I believe that God is working.
I have hope the day will come
when the church of God will rise.*

The choice is set before you.

*Will you change and take new paths?
Or rely on "It's Aye Been"?
I cannot guarantee the end.
And the road has many bumps.
You need to be a team.
You need to share your faith.
You need to care for all.
And know God's saving grace.*

*There are seasons, times and hours.
Knowing each is hard to do.
Some require different steps.
Different gifts and people too.
Will you listen to each other?
Will you learn to watch and pray?
Will you walk this path together?
Will you let go of pride and say,
"I need help, I do not know the way."?*

*There may be things that need to end,
and others need a start.
Just remember it's not over yet.
There's a big picture here.
Jesus promised to be with us
and His Kingdom will endure.'*

*As my words fade out of sound and sight,
I can only trust that what I've said tonight
will resonate with those who hear
and, as I leave, remain.
It is their burden now.
My time has ended here.*

Articulating my thoughts and feelings in this form allowed me to reflect on the experience of my research in a concise way. It is messy and recognises the effect my perspective and background had on my fieldwork and analysis. It acknowledges my frustration, hurt and anxiety over the future for these churches. It names the pain and recognises my conviction that God has a plan and purpose for the people and churches. Alongside my academic interest, I have a personal and emotional interest. I want to see these churches succeed, but I also need to recognise the limits of my research and the natural end of my investment in the daily life of the people and places that dominated every thought, word and action for the duration of my fieldwork. The choice is not mine to make. It belongs to these local churches. As I articulate the journey

and voice my experience of these churches, I provide a lens for the wider church to examine their own experiences and make decisions about what the future will hold.

10.2 Seeing in Pictures: Reviewing My Research Journey

I have intentionally framed my thesis with a series of metaphors taken from my fieldwork experiences living with rural parish churches in the Borders. They simultaneously trace the development of my fieldwork and aspects of my methodological and theological reflections on my research. Each image and associated piece of autoethnographic writing represents a process of exploration and discovery.

The *Jigsaw* metaphor represented my scrambled and sometimes faltering attempts at finding the necessary pieces to form the frame and foundation for my research. Unlike a traditional jigsaw puzzle I did not have a reference guide for familiarising myself with the context of Braedubh and Riverglebe, nor was I prepared for the complexity and messiness of attempting to piece together the background information I needed while I was simultaneously adapting to living in Braedubh. The image of piecing together a jigsaw was a useful way of reminding myself to look for patterns or themes and begin by building a frame of points on which to anchor my descriptions and analysis. Theologically, I reflected on passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and the importance of individual parts combining to function together as a unit. It was essential for me to be explicit about gathering and recording the appropriate background information to introduce my research to readers, providing them with a frame to use as they pieced together a picture of Braedubh and Riverglebe and this shared experience.

The *Choir* metaphor emerged from my experiences with two choirs in the Borders, a chamber ensemble and Riverglebe community choir. I found it helpful to relate my early fieldwork to joining a choir as a way of reminding myself to approach situations and people from a position of humility, coming alongside them and learning to watch and listen well. However, there are difficulties in joining a small choir or ensemble. Despite my intentions, I was automatically perceived to be someone with special knowledge, abilities and

contributions to make to the local setting. My introduction to both churches varied significantly and there was some misunderstanding about my role. This was one of the drawbacks of moving to Braedubh at the very beginning of my PhD studies in 2016 before my research was well-defined. I also lacked the methodological foundation and training to approach my fieldwork with intentionality. While I found the choir metaphor to be useful in thinking about how churches function (see chapter 5), it was particularly relevant for my experience of finding a way into my fieldwork and engaging with the local people, places and practices of both parishes.

The *Compere* metaphor was a natural choice for reflecting my changing position within Braedubh and Riverglebe. As my fieldwork developed and I established relationships with individuals and groups, I also began taking a more active role in the direction of my fieldwork by proposing new initiatives. As discussed in chapter 3 I had a limited capacity for being able to engage with action research as a methodology; however, I was navigating complex expectations from Crossbrae Presbytery and both churches about what my research should encompass in terms of practical outcomes. As a result, I suggested various possibilities and was actively engaged a variety of activities beyond those recorded in my thesis. My fieldwork involvement, particularly during this stage, was remarkably complicated in terms of managing time and expectations. As I recorded in Chapter 6, the Gala Day was originally intended to be an event during which I could gather detailed qualitative responses to a series of questions about perceptions of 'church' and 'village' from a broad range of respondents. Instead, it stimulated extensive reflections on the role of leaders and the importance of communication, based on my lived experience, ultimately confirming that my thesis needed to be presented through my autoethnographic voice.

The metaphor of the *Reflective Storyteller* gave me a way of articulating the importance of narratives throughout my research. Rather than preparing reports, I was engaged in an interactive process of participating in and contributing to the congregational narratives of Braedubh and Riverglebe. I was making choices about what to include and what to leave out, knowing that each decision would ultimately affect the direction and impact of my research. Through the process I found myself navigating competing expectations and

perceptions. I wanted to find ways of communicating the hard things without hurting people with whom I had formed friendships. I also found myself reframing my findings or conclusions based on my audience, recognising that I needed to use accessible language and differing presentation styles to communicate my conclusions and recommendations well.

The final metaphor of *Prophetic Practice* was the most difficult to articulate. It is an explicitly theological image, which reflects the significance of the task I attempted. The calling of an Old Testament prophet was to speak truth into a situation, exhorting listeners to respond with faithfulness. Finding a way to bring together the strands of my research and apply them in contextually appropriate ways to encourage rural parish churches was immensely challenging. The process of analysing my fieldwork experiences, copious notes, reflections and additional reading required me to take time away from being immersed in my fieldwork. However, I felt a duty to be fully involved in Braedubh and Riverglebe for the duration of my fieldwork and spend twenty-seven months in intensive contact with the people and places who formed the foundations of my research.⁵²³ Every interaction contributed to the swirling miasma of thoughts, ideas and stories that were part of my research. I was both surrounded by people and isolated from them because of my role and research responsibilities. When I moved away from Braedubh and Riverglebe I also left a community of people with whom I identified after sharing their hurts, pains and frustrations, yet I was no longer 'one of them'. As a result, I needed to take several months following my fieldwork to process the psychological, spiritual and emotional impact of my experiences and attempt to find a way to analyse and present my research that was both honest and academically appropriate. In many ways I identified with the biblical prophets who walked difficult and lonely roads.

As I bring my research to a close, each of these images remains significant for me as a researcher, but also for the churches who welcomed me into their lives and those who will read my thesis. Each one provides a way of walking in my footsteps, learning from my experiences and sharing in my journey.

⁵²³ Apart from a few holidays and short visits to friends.

10.3 Standing Still: Evaluating My Research

There are two key aspects in assessing my research. First, considering how my research and thesis have fulfilled the criteria I established at the outset, along with the basic criteria for a PhD thesis. Second, reflecting on the limitations, strengths and weaknesses of my research.

10.3.1 Research Criteria

I began my thesis with a clear set of aims for my fieldwork and writing (section 1.2). I also introduced a set of criteria for critically evaluating my research as an autoethnographic approach to practical theology. In addition to evaluating my research against my stated aims and methodological criteria, my thesis should be demonstrably original and make a significant contribution to the field of rural theology and practice.

My fieldwork and writing have fulfilled my research aims by focusing on the lived reality of two churches in the Borders. I was actively immersed in both churches and their respective villages, contributing to the life of both churches as an embodied participant. I observed, investigated and recorded all aspects of my experiences, reflecting on them for the purpose of contributing to the future development of mission and ministry locally and regionally. I actively supported and encouraged both churches, facilitating discussions and making recommendations for the future throughout the period of my fieldwork.

My thesis is demonstrably autoethnographic (section 3.5), recording the stories of real people in real places and real circumstances. I have intentionally used inclusive pronouns and titles to protect the identities and privacy of the people who generously shared their lives with me during my fieldwork and writing. In recognizing and engaging with the particularity of individuals, churches, communities, and perspectives as belonging to a specific interpretive framework, I have presented a nuanced account of the process and the results. By recording and sharing stories, I have demonstrated the value of my personal experiences and the potential for using specific examples to develop general applications, inviting readers to draw their own conclusions. This affirms the *resonance* and *verisimilitude* of my thesis, enabling people to recognise the

truth of the lived realities of these churches and identify parallels with their own experiences.⁵²⁴

I have reflected on the impact of my personal ‘effective history’ and perspective, recognising my influence in the local churches and presbytery. As I questioned and interpreted the situation and results, I placed myself in a position of being questioned.⁵²⁵ I had the potential to misrepresent people’s perspectives and motivations, including my own, but writing with authentic self-reflexivity has enabled me to invite readers to engage in their own interpretation of my thesis. I used my experiences to provide a suitable structure for uniting the seemingly disparate foci and purposes of my research while presenting a cohesive narrative about the importance of rural parish churches and developing a rural missiology.

My research also had a personal and local impact. In Braedubh and Riverglebe I invited local people to reflect on their understanding of ministry and mission, challenging their concepts of ‘church’. My experiences simultaneously challenged my presuppositions about ‘parish’ and the Church of Scotland as I investigated the value and importance of a geographical approach to mission and ministry. Through my fieldwork and writing I found myself championing rural parish churches, convinced they had the potential to become effective holistic, embodied representations of the *missio Dei* in Scotland by engaging in authentic relationships with people and places of their parish.

As I demonstrated in my literature review, rural Scottish parish churches have been under-researched and under-represented in the conversations around rural churches (section 2.5.6). I also identified a lack of clarity in defining ‘rural’ theology, leading me to develop a working definition as a guideline for my thesis (section 2.6), which I expanded into a rural missiology (chapter 8). Therefore, my thesis offers a significant contribution to the field. My thesis has the potential to contribute to a wider conversation around practical reforms in the Church of Scotland and beyond, inviting practitioners and researchers to engage

⁵²⁴ Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, *Autoethnography*, p. 85; Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, pp. 237, 241–44.

⁵²⁵ Loftus and Trede, ‘Hermeneutic Writing’, pp. 61–72, at p. 65.

in similar investigative research in their own contexts. My choice of an autoethnographic approach to rural theology ensures that the lives and stories of local people can be heard at a national level, demonstrating both originality and impact.

10.3.2 Limitations, Strengths & Weaknesses

My research is necessarily limited in scope, focusing on my lived experiences of two case study churches in the Scottish Borders. My thesis represents a particular narrative approach to answering my research question using a curated selection of examples from my fieldwork. In line with my methodology, I focus on my observations, experiences and reflections, incorporating comments or feedback from participants as appropriate. The final form of my thesis is the result of an iterative process of discovery and dialogue between my fieldwork experiences, conversations with participants, reflexive writing and scholarship.

The primary strength of my thesis is also its primary weakness. While I shared in the lived reality of these churches during my fieldwork, writing fieldnotes and journal entries, recording every aspect of my embodied experience, I had limited formal feedback from participants on my presentations and reflections. I also found that attendance at presentation events was inconsistent. People were happy to have informal conversations about my research in the course of daily life in the Borders but were unlikely to complete formal responses. The combination of my limited training and preparation prior to beginning my fieldwork and the challenges of the field itself contributed to the iterative process of developing my methodological toolbox and arriving at autoethnography (chapter 3). If I were to engage in similar research with rural churches in the future or return to Braedubh and Riverglebe to evaluate their continuing journey, I would expand my methodology to include specific interviews and facilitated group reflections.

10.4 Looking Forward: Disseminating My Research

Although my thesis has been specific and limited in its scope and focus, I am aware of the potential for sharing my research with a diverse audience. It represents the intersection between practice and theology, making it accessible

for practitioners as well as academics. I have collected a wealth of material from my fieldwork and reflections, far exceeding my requirements for this thesis. In the future I will continue to use my experiences to shape my continued enquiry and teaching, looking for opportunities to share the stories of these rural churches and others. It is my hope that my research will raise the profile of rural parish mission and ministry in Scotland, drawing attention to the challenges and opportunities for rural parish churches.

My links with rural ministry practitioners in the UK provide a natural network for disseminating my research beyond the Church of Scotland. My fieldwork experience and engagement with the challenges facing rural churches will inform my continued involvement with the International Rural Churches Association (IRCA) and the Churches Rural Group (CRG) for Churches Together in England (CTE). In the coming months and years I will explore possibilities for developing my rural missiology, publishing reports and articles in association with the Mission Research Network (MRN) and Women in Missiology (WiM) network.

My research partnership with Crossbrae Presbytery gave me opportunities to share my findings and recommendations at a local level, encouraging the development of contextual team approaches to mission and ministry. My research demonstrates the scope for further research into the lived experiences of people in rural Scotland, but I argue it is equally necessary for churches to engage in a process of self-examination, discernment and re-visioning. The present situation facing the Church of Scotland invites the possibility for applying my research and working alongside the Faith Impact and Faith Nurture Forums in considering the future of rural parish churches.

10.5 Crossing the Border: Stepping into the Future

As I drew my fieldwork and time in the Borders to a close, I acknowledged the emotional impact of my experiences, allowing myself to feel the journey and share in the emotions of my churches. Letting go of my fieldwork and leaving the local area with my final presentation in October 2019 involved a type of tearing away, placing a separation between me and the people I had invested in

for 3 years. My fieldwork was messy and complicated, mirroring the struggles and pain of my case study churches.

As I bring my thesis to an end I am reminded that I am crossing a border. This marks the end of my research journey and the beginning of my career. My research, reading and experiences ignited a passion for rural mission and ministry. I have become an advocate for rural churches, convinced that there is potential for a creative, sustainable future for rural mission and ministry.

However, it is not a future that can be achieved by maintaining the 'aye been' models and approaches. The Church of Scotland, and rural parish churches, stand at a border crossing. My thesis has presented a perspective on the challenges and opportunities for revitalising churches in rural contexts, but it will remain merely a collection of words unless they are used to inform practice. Will local, regional, national and international churches and denominations listen to the stories and embrace the possibility of something new?

I end with the words spoken to Joshua at another border in another time:

*Be strong and courageous.
Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged,
for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.
(Josh. 1:9)*

Appendix 1 – Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Introduction:

My name is Heather Major and I am a PhD research student with the University of Glasgow.

This project is a study of the local parish churches and communities in [Braedubh] and [Riverglebe]. This project aims to look at the challenges and opportunities for parish churches in rural villages in Scotland. This includes gathering a range of perspectives on the history of the church, the current situation and possible ideas for the future.

I will be participating in the life of both churches and communities and recording what I see, hear and experience in a series of reflective journals. Based on the things I hear from being involved I will look at the patterns and questions that might help us understand what might be needed for the future. I will arrange formal interviews and organize discussion groups where ideas can be discussed and plans made for the future.

Throughout the process I will be actively supporting and encouraging the work of the church and each of you as church members. I will do my best to clearly communicate anything I see in order to assist the church as it moves into the future. Anything I do or suggest will be as a direct result of my reflections on the church and the things you yourselves identify. This is an incredible opportunity to look at the rural church in Scotland and I cannot do it without your support and the support of the Presbytery, so thank you.

Participation

This project is only possible through the active involvement of individuals. Partaking in this research project means giving your permission for me to include references to you and things I've heard or observed in the course of the day-to-day life of the church and community. It also includes your permission to be involved in any interviews and discussion groups.

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary and very much appreciated. Should you decide to withdraw your permission I will respect your request and refrain from including references to your involvement in situations or conversations in my reflections from that point on.

Anonymity/Confidentiality

It is common practice in this type of research that anything I write and record for my PhD will be anonymized prior to submission or publication. Where names are required, appropriate pseudonyms will be used. Due to the size of the churches and communities, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed; however, any identifying features or descriptions will either be removed or

formally approved by the individual concerned. Throughout the process I will strive to maintain confidentiality, particularly relating to any sensitive issues or topics, unless I hear anything that I have a legal duty to report regarding wrongdoing or potential for harm.

Obviously, I have a responsibility as a researcher to honestly reflect on the past, the present and the future of the church and my perceptions, but I also have a duty of care to you as people and as a church. As I engage in writing up I would actively welcome your feedback. If there is a passage or a piece of writing that specifically pertains to you or a conversation that I feel needs your approval I will be sure to run it past you before including it.

Data Collection and Use

The data I collect through interviews, discussion groups and reflecting on my observations and participation will form the basis of my PhD. As such, it will be used for exploring questions and developing a 'thick' description of the local church and community. The raw data of my reflective journals, notes and transcripts will be stored in my private office or on a password protected computer, accessible only to myself, my academic supervisors and my examiners. All data preserved for publication or presentation in the form of conference papers will be anonymized or presented in general terms.

Sponsors

This research has been joint funded by the Church of Scotland, the local Presbytery and Trinity College, University of Glasgow. Regular reports will be submitted to all three sponsors to confirm the research is being carried out, but the terms of confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained.

Feedback/Complaints

I would welcome your feedback throughout the process, so feel free to speak to me when you see me, or send me an email at h.major.1@research.gla.ac.uk

If you have any questions concerning the project or concerns about the way it is being conducted, please feel free to contact my supervisors at the University of Glasgow:

Rev Dr Doug Gay, doug.gay@glasgow.ac.uk, 0141 330 2073

Rev Dr Alexander Forsyth, alexander.forsyth@glasgow.ac.uk

Appendix 2 – Consent Form

CONSENT TO THE USE OF DATA

University of Glasgow, College of Arts Research Ethics Committee

I understand that _____ Heather Major _____
(name of researcher)

is collecting data in the form of
___ Observations, Conversations, Discussions, Printed Materials _____
for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow.

- ☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
- ☐ I understand that participants will be referred to by a pseudonym if names are required.
- ☐ I acknowledge that anonymity may not be guaranteed due to the limited size of the community and participant sample.

I give my consent to the use of data for this purpose on the understanding that:

- All personal data will be treated in compliance with the Data Protection Act to ensure privacy.
- The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

I agree to take part in this research project

Signed by the contributor: _____ Date: _____

OR

Signed on behalf of the contributor (i.e. parent/guardian in case of a person under 18)

_____ Date: _____

<p>Researcher's name and email contact: Heather Major, h.major.1@research.gla.ac.uk Supervisor's name and email contact: Rev Dr Doug Gay, doug.gay@glasgow.ac.uk Department address: No 4 The Square, University of Glasgow, G12 8QQ</p>

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