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**THE EXPERIENCE OF INVOLUNTARY
CHILDLESSNESS IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN
IRELAND**

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BA, BD



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Abstract

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has, to some degree, acknowledged pastoral concern regarding infertility, yet its impact on the lives of its congregants has never been sufficiently investigated. Therefore, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of PCI parishioners contending with involuntary childlessness; to examine the level of hurt and disconnectedness that may have occurred, as well as to identify some of the associated contributing factors; and to evaluate the perceptions and practices of both clergy and laity regarding the act of baptism and its impact on the congregational life of those experiencing childlessness. In seeking to achieve these objectives, a qualitative study was undertaken via a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 14 parishioners and the administering of a short questionnaire to a select group of clergy. The major findings revealed that, not only had PCI failed to provide the pastoral care expected by the congregants, but also that parishioners experience significant feelings of emotional distress. Many parishioners felt excluded by family-based activities, rituals, and calendar events within the Church and that, overall, their needs were largely unmet by the ecclesiastical authorities. Based on these findings it was proposed that more inclusive covenant communities could be formed by viewing ecclesiology through the lens of eschatology. Among the recommendations were the need for greater pastoral awareness and theological training on the topic, adjustments also being made to the baptismal liturgies which cause discomfort to many infertile congregants, and the provision of relevant resources.

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Declaration

“I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.”

Printed Name: Alistair Bates_____

Signature: _____Digitally Printed Confirmation

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Setting the Scene

1.2 Background to the Problem

My interest in those experiencing involuntary childlessness arrived somewhat by surprise while I was officiating at an infant baptism service in the church where I was the minister. I invited the young couple with their infant baby to the front of the church and as usual, the couple indicated their approval of the vows they were to take before dutifully handing me their young child. It was at that point that I noticed a young couple to my left, and I could sense their discomfort. The woman was visibly tearful. I continued the act of baptism but made a mental note of their reaction. Later that week, as I spoke with them, it became apparent that they were experiencing secondary infertility. I had initially assumed that infertility referred to couples who had never conceived a child, and the fact that secondary infertility referred to couples who could not conceive a second child challenged my original perceptions.

For the first time in my ministry of almost 15 years, I became aware of how unsettling the matter of infertility might be. It led to many thought-provoking questions, such as, had I practiced my ministry with an underlying set of assumptions never before examined? Had I been impervious to the pain of childless couples because I was already a father? What about the time I had spent encouraging creative activities at Sunday school. Had I assumed that protecting the church's future depended upon attracting families to church? And most importantly, had I also assumed that it was God's will for every married couple to have children, giving little thought for those who perhaps believed the same, but were incapable of conceiving? My presuppositions were further challenged by my reading of the book *Reconceiving Infertility* by Moss and Baden.

This thesis will challenge some of those basic assumptions, during which, the research question relating to experience of involuntary childlessness within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland will be explored. As I seek to do so, the reader will become acquainted with the particularity of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. In Chapter Two, I will explore the global impact of infertility. Whilst ‘the West’ may not exhibit some of the extremes referenced in global examples, there is nonetheless a commonality of experiences regardless of geographical location. Once establishing the methodology and methods in Chapter Three, I will focus on those who took part in the research in Chapter Four. Having explored the nature of those experiences, Chapters Five to Eight will incorporate theological reflection, pragmatic response and a final conclusion. Following this structure will help navigate through a description of the problem of involuntary childlessness within the PCI.

As my initial assumptions were challenged by the book *Reconceiving Infertility* by Moss and Baden, it was therefore considered necessary to outline in some detail their position for at least two reasons. Firstly, it challenges the premise that procreation, in desire or practice, is a fundamental requirement of marriage. Secondly, the importance that their position places on the eschaton shaping our present reality, a reality that for many will not include children. Consequently, elements of the groundwork provided by Moss and Baden have helped give shape to some of the theological reflections later contained in the thesis. On that basis their proposals will be covered in detail.

1.3 Reconceiving Infertility

The critical biblical text examined by the book is ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (Gen 1:28) Moss and Baden contest that:

This command, unlike so many in the Hebrew Bible, was given to all humanity, not just to Israel – a distinction that appears to be emphasized by the fact that it

is given both to Adam and then again to Noah, in other words, to the two “first men.” According to the Mishna, the earliest codification of Jewish law, “A man must not abstain from ‘be fruitful and multiply’ unless he already has children.” This law was taken up and applied in midrash over the next eight centuries as a staple of rabbinic thought. (70)

The capacity to conceive is considered a blessing according to the words of Gen. 22:17 which say, “I will bestow my blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore.” Conversely, ‘it is all too easy to consider those who cannot procreate as cursed’ (71). If one chooses not to bear children, then you are living in violation of God’s law. If you remain infertile, after repeated attempts at conception, the implication is that you must be cursed (71).

In relation to Abrahamic faith traditions, this has obvious implications for those who are childless today, irrespective of the context or surrounding circumstances. According to Moss and Baden:

The initial words to humanity seem fairly unequivocal. And when that first man and woman are seen as not only prototypical but also archetypal – not just the first humans, but the models for all of humanity that followed – then it is logical enough that everyone, each of us living today, should be beholden to the same divine command. (72)

Yet, the fact that this command re-appears at various times in the book of Genesis should lead us to explore other options and challenge this dominant interpretation.

The command was issued at three stages in the development of the biblical narrative and may indeed have been significant. Along with Adam and Eve, Noah and the patriarchs also received these instructions and “there is something different about the command when it is delivered to everyone after Genesis 1 – a difference of timing.” (72). One can understand the context and necessity of the instruction being given to Adam and Eve before they

embraced family life. Yet after populating the earth and facing God's displeasure and destruction by the flood, the instruction is given a second time, this time to Noah.¹

As a command, this would seem reasonable for Noah's sons since we know that while they had wives, who were also on the ark, they had no children at the time of the flood. But why should Noah also receive the command to be fertile? He has already done so. What's more, he will not father any more children after the flood. How is Noah therefore supposed to be fruitful and multiply? (73). The final instruction is given to the patriarchs, Abraham and Jacob. Abraham already had one son and Jacob twelve, so this could be seen as a somewhat over-zealous command in the light of his already crowded household. "What, then, could God have intended by instructing Jacob to be fruitful and multiply?" (73). According to Moss and Baden, if, 'be fruitful and multiply' is viewed as a universal command, then it is clear that Noah and Jacob were guilty of divine disobedience and, according to Gen 1:22, the fish of the sea would have been guilty of such defiance too (74). They further suggest that if it is to be considered a divine blessing, rather than a command, then the 'one obliged to act', is in fact the speaker. This is the responsibility God assumes when he says to Abraham, 'I will make you very fruitful' (74).

The fact that that this blessing is often equated with the promise of offspring causes significant problems. This leads Moss and Baden to ask, 'if the blessing of fertility is envisioned to be a promise of offspring, then why would God give it to Noah and Jacob, neither of whom would father another child?' (74). Both argue that the production of biological offspring was necessary as a requirement to populate the earth, but judgment in

¹ It is important to note that within the context of this thesis, the focus on the biblical narrative is a means of revealing and illustrating the nature and purposes of God rather than the historical veracity of the main characters discussed.

terms of the flood and the tower of Babel necessitated a particular instruction of procreation. It could be argued, that this essential command served its teleological purpose when finally issued to Abraham, with reference to Gen. 12:2. They assert that:

As we have noted in the previous chapter, having a “great name” is dependent on having descendants to carry that name forward. This is the blessing God promises Abraham - offspring. There is also, however, the first clause of God’s promise - to make Abraham into a great nation. Off-springs are obviously necessary to make this promise come true. But it would be foolhardy to read the promise of Genesis 12 as related primarily to the question of whether Abraham and Sarah will have a son.... No matter how many children Abraham may have in his lifetime, they will never be enough to be considered a great nation. No matter how many stories of their father they tell, they will never be able to make Abraham’s name great. God’s promise to Abraham of blessing, of offspring – like the promise of land that will come to pass only centuries later – is multigenerational. It anticipates nationhood, not fatherhood (75).

Of particular importance is the contention that between Genesis and Exodus, the people of Israel were established as a nation. “Pointedly, from that point forward, no individual in the Bible receives the blessing to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ or even a variation on it.” As such, it was neither timeless nor universal (80) and because it is not a universal imperative applied to all women, its goal is therefore not childbirth, but political and ethnic establishment (83).

The transitioning from biological parenthood to the concept of nationhood is paramount in the reasoning of Moss and Baden. This enables them to demote fertility to the pragmatic purposes of creating a nation. Once this nation has been established, the significance of being faced with the crisis of infertility no longer plays a significant part in the narrative or drama. This is evidenced with reference to the twelve tribes of Israel firmly established through Jacob’s twelve sons. However, his daughter Dinah does not produce children and yet there is no suggestion that she was barren or infertile. This is regarded as irrelevant, as little is at stake, ‘as no tribe, no lineal descent, no inheritance of name or land,

goes through her as a female. Indeed, this would appear to be true, in the biblical model of all women' (81).

As a result of nationhood taking a prominent position in the developing narrative, it is not surprising that personal infertility is relegated, and corporate barrenness now emerges as the new threat to God fulfilling his promises. No longer does individual barrenness dominate the biblical narrative, but attention now focuses on the fruitfulness of Israel.

Isaiah uses a range of female imagery to personify Zion, but we are here concerned with one particular aspect: his depiction of exilic Zion as a barren mother. Like the matriarchs of Genesis, Isaiah's Zion is defined by her infertility. The first, and almost the only, words that Isaiah puts in her mouth are about nothing else, "I was bereaved and barren, exiled and disdained" (Isa 49:21). The equation with the matriarchs is made clear in Isaiah 54:1 where Zion is addressed as "barren, who bore no child" – barren, '*aqara*, the very word used of Sarah (Gen. 11:30), Rebekah (Gen. 25:21) and Rachel (Gen. 29:31); bore no child, *lo yaldah*, the precise phrase applied to Sarah (Gen. 16:1) and Rachel (Gen 30:1) (104).

The shocking celebration of the nation's barrenness is declared (Isa. 54:1) but must be set against the historical and theological backdrop of the biblical narrative of anticipation. Consequently, 'Isaiah uses the image of Zion as a barren mother in the service of depicting a gloriously reversed future state, a time in fact when Israel will be so full of people, so fertile in every sense, that her previously barren state will be but a distant memory' (104).

The empty land is equated with the empty womb and the return from exile with fertility. The acknowledgement of the eschaton is critical to the growing awareness that God may have intervened in the case of individuals but only to protect a collective promise yet to be fulfilled. That promise was never intended towards individuals, but a nation. The nation,

when in exile, was a metaphor of barrenness at almost every level of their existence. However, a day was coming when Israel would return to the promise and find fertility and fulfilment in life shared with God. ‘As we tease out the significance of the baptism and Jesus divine sonship, we shall see a model of parenting accessible to everyone and, crucially, divorced from individual procreation and procreative abilities. This has ramifications for the conversation about infertility because, as Moss and Baden argue, any vision of the family, untethered from biology, reconfigures parenthood in such a way that it can include those without biological offspring’ (141).

Moss and Baden propose that whilst the Gospel of Luke attributes a certain uniqueness to the virgin Mary, it also suggests similarities to Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth, in that that she joins a cohort of women whose pregnancies illustrate the power of God (160). In their book, the increasing reference to relationships outside of a biological connection becomes apparent by their reference to the practice of adoption in the Roman world. They claim that, unlike contemporary society, the Romans were less interested in child welfare or constructing a charitable foster system. Instead, adoption was more oriented toward preserving the family line and ensuring the transference of wealth, status, and property. Biological family may not ensure that the right personal gifts were in place to safeguard the transference of such rights, but ‘in Roman thinking, legal rights outmatched genetic code’ (141). Leaving aside the theological complication about Jesus’ baptism and Mark’s understanding of Christ’s divinity, for Mark and his audience, adoption was real parenthood. It was the model (in Mark at least) for Jesus’s relationship with God, and it became, among later Christian authors like Paul, the model for humanity’s relationship with God. Adoption is not concessionary here, it is divine (149).

If this marks Jesus relationship with God, then his relationship with Mary throughout the biblical narrative becomes one of distancing. This is evidenced by what is claimed to be a harsh encounter between Jesus and Mary at the wedding of Cana. This was extended to other members of his biological family when he claims, 'Here are my mother and brothers' (Matt. 12:49). Yet, he contrasts his own need for such a distancing with a new responsibility for his own disciples. As Mary and 'the beloved disciple' watch Jesus on the cross, Jesus says, referring to John, 'Woman, here is your son' and then to John, he says, 'Here is your mother' (John 19:26-27). From that point on John took Mary to live with him at his own house. 'If this scene is, as most scholars have agreed, about care for others, then the model for that care is most properly seen as familial, not charitable. Jesus binds his mother and disciples to one another, and in doing so, unshackles familial ties from biological foundations' where natural ties are no longer the binding influence (166).

The authors now move to Paul and find even greater momentum away from the necessity of biological offspring to viewing even marriage itself as a concession. They insist that Paul clearly regards celibacy as taking priority over marriage and, if necessary, it is to avoid sexual immorality. Celibacy is indeed a divine gift, and marriage is not a sin, but neither is it necessarily a blessing (173). In a rather bold claim, they write:

That Paul encourages his communities to eschew marriage and focus on God means that he devalues procreation and childbearing. When we consider that Paul *is* interested in the *family* of believers, his lack of attention to parenthood becomes especially noteworthy. It places him in tension with modern Christian views of parenthood as the cornerstone of the family and in line with Jesus' teaching about leaving one's own biological family behind in order to receive a new divine family. (173)

In a somewhat speculative, yet no less interesting leap, they consider the healing of the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5) and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) as restorative

towards a futuristic norm symbolising a preparation for our resurrected or eschatological body. In both cases, there is no hint of fertility being a sign of such a transformation, ‘that Philip does not “fix” this condition suggests that the eunuch’s body is already appropriately fashioned for the kingdom of heaven. The Ethiopian eunuch, like the woman with the flow of power, is reproductively incapacitated, and thus already perfected for the Kingdom of Heaven’ (212). Furthermore, it is clear from Jesus’ encounter with the Sadducees in Mark 19 that the resurrected dead are unmarried. If that is the case, and Jewish and Christian beliefs reserve sex for marriage, then sex is eliminated in the afterlife, ‘for ancient Jews and Christians, the afterlife is a celebration of God, not a family reunion. It is a vision of the afterlife where fertility and infertility are viewed equally’ (217).

The journey from Eden to Heaven, according to Moss and Baden, is indeed an interesting one. In their attempt to reconceive infertility, they have at least called into question the preoccupation in regarding it as a disability. In a fitting summary they conclude:

The remarkable aspect of the elevation of infertility is not that it stands apart from other disabilities, but rather that it stands as a part of the tableau of heavenly perfection. Barrenness is not the exception to the rule; it is the new rule. It is not the new normal; it is the heavenly ideal. Perhaps, here the reflection of heavenly realities sheds light onto earthly ones. (228)

If Moss and Baden are correct, then God’s default position is infertility, and if this is true, then my previous contention that a married couple should be willing to produce children is based on a very unsatisfactory set of assumptions. However, according to Levine, their introduction of a ‘sexless soteriology’ may have created an altogether different discomfort. “To those who have lost a life-long-partner or a child, the claim that ‘the afterlife is a celebration of God, not a family reunion’ (217) may well be heart-wrenching” (Levine 2016, 312). The description of an after-life retaining particular knowledge of partners and children

appears to be a common theme, both within the PCI and the wider church. Yet, Levine's description of 'sexless soteriology' is intriguing and is certainly implied in Moss and Baden's work. However, if such a description is tenable, why limit it to soteriology? Why could such a description not also be applied to ecclesiology as well? Further, if that were the case, what impact would it have on the experience of childlessness within the church?

Moss and Baden have sufficiently raised enough doubt to warrant further investigation. As a consequence, the need arose to consider if their proposal created a better framework to understand infertility, and if so, the PCI's traditional understanding of marriage, procreation, covenant, and eschatology could rightfully be challenged. Nevertheless, no matter how intriguing those questions were, *Reconceiving Infertility* shed very little light on the actual experience of those challenged by involuntary childlessness or to what extent it was considered a problem. In order to evaluate the impact of involuntary childlessness on faith communities, the following section considers any possible alienation that may occur as a result of the experience.

1.4 Ecclesiastical Alienation

The journey associated with faith and procreation appears to give rise to cycles of hope and despair in both men and women (Cipolletta and Faccio 2013; Mosalanejad et al. 2014; Peddie, Teijlingen, and Bhattacharya 2005). In Sonya Doragh's blog she poignantly describes her own personal experience:

We struggled through the complexities of grieving a nameless loss whilst trying to hold on to hope for a child and faith in God. Giving up hope seemed like letting each other down, and yet holding onto hope seemed to magnify the monthly disappointment.

Our hope for a child and our faith in God got tangled together early on. We asked for prayer many times. Those that prayed for us assured us that we would

get pregnant; that God had a child for us. One well-meaning prayer minister declared that I was in fact already pregnant, that God was knitting our child together in my womb... if that was the case, it is the longest gestating human foetus in history, as the prayer time was some 15 years ago and there is no sign of a full womb yet.

There were also those that questioned: “Have you prayed?” “Have you repented of the sins of your ancestors? Infertility often follows sin by the maternal grandmother.” “Do you trust God can do this for you?” “Is your faith strong enough?” At that time, I was a faith missionary and Phil a youth worker, and we trusted God implicitly for our daily bread. It was an additional wound to have our faith questioned as we clung to God in our grief. (Doragh, 2019).

Faith appears to add new dimensions to hope and disappointment, or even become the source of blame. In the case of Doragh, it was suggested to her that lack of trust in God may have, in some way, perpetuated her childlessness. This led Doragh to conclude, “these well-intentioned enquiries (comments) only served to add blame to our struggle or imply somehow that if we just tweaked our relationship with God correctly, we would get pregnant” (ibid). Such remarks implied that were she to exercise a little more faith in God, then it would have been possible to believe she was pregnant without evidence.

The internalising of blame, or a sense of guilt, is validated by the requirement to repent in order to conceive. Otherwise, the blame is externalised, as in the case of her maternal grandmother, and once renounced, pregnancy would follow. During the research for this thesis, a correspondent said that he had significant success in praying with infertile couples, particularly when he had encouraged them to renounce any family ties to the Masonic Order.

It is not just the theological complexities that haunt childless couples, but also the careless words of individuals, traditional liturgies, ecclesiastical structures, and calendar events. When a couple marries, it is not just the celebration of the love between two individuals that is being referenced, but the apparent social reality that children should

follow. For example, the preface to be read out during the Anglican service of marriage, with mirrored replication in almost all mainstream churches, is the following declaration:

The gift of marriage brings husband and wife together in delight and tenderness of sexual union and joyful commitment to the end of their lives. It is given as the foundation of family life in which children are [born and] nurtured and in which each member of the family, in good times and in bad, may find strength, companionship and comfort, and grow to maturity in love (CofE, 2021).

No liturgy assumes, infers or by any other reference sanctions any other choice, let alone sensitively recognises the social reality of infertility. As Lisa Penny comments in her blog:

We married at 25 and thought this meant we had time on our side. Year after year, pregnancy announcements flooded in from friends, family members and friends of friends, and all I could think (whilst being completely happy for others) was *why* is this not happening for us? It felt as if everyone was moving forward in life but us (Penny, 2019)

Time may seem to stand still for some, but one's personal relationship with God can appear to stagnate as well, as Rosemary Morgan concluded:

My experience of infertility did terrible things to my relationship with God. I was angry and disappointed; I avoided God. I remember sitting with another member of my church and hearing him say, "Adversity can really bring people closer to God. When things are difficult, it can give us a wonderful sense of God's presence with us." I was furious. I felt no such closeness, only pain. I felt forgotten by God. (Morgan 2013, 7)

Society makes all types of assumptions and in societal discourses these are often given unsolicited as in the case of Jody Day, when she writes:

An elderly woman collared me to tell me "how selfish" my generation were, "too obsessed with their careers to have children." The truth was that at this point, my husband and I had been trying to conceive for about nine years. It is also really tough when people presume, I do have children, but they are just not here at the moment. "Isn't it great when they go back to school?" (Day 2019, 125)

Often, church activities leave childless couples feeling marginalised, as was the case for Jesse Hesse in blog reflected:

As I flipped through the bulletin, I saw several ministries the church offered for various stages of adult life – singles, newly married, families with kids, and empty nesters. Nothing for childless, not-wedded-yesterday couples. I was already feeling rejected by God. Now, I felt left out of his church. (Hesse, 2018)

Kathy Rine observes in her blog that it is the child-centric, parent worshipping focus of the church that has led to the invisibility of childless couples. Reflecting on this she argues “Childless Christians are stuck in a vortex of isolation and pain, and no one even sees it.” (Rine, 2021). Indeed, she is not alone in her assessment, with many childless couples taking their place in the pew while suffocating under an acute sense of not belonging, of invisibility and misplaced.

Lizzie Lowrie also shared her story online and contends that some within church leadership need a change of perspective. She argues that:

The childless need you, they need the church to step up to Jesus’ description of family rather than giving into a definition that is so small and exclusive. You preach about idols, about money, sex and power, but do you challenge the idolatry of marriage and children, or do you encourage it? (Lowrie, 2017)

Regarding calendar events, Patty Breen in her blog states, sometimes, as a woman without children, my heart hurts, stings a bit, when the priest makes the announcements for all moms to stand and receive a blessing during Mass on Mother’s Day. “It is difficult when everyone around you is standing” (Breen, 2019). It is difficult for those who are struggling with the intense pain often associated with childlessness, to be spotlighted in such an insensitive manner.

The repetitive nature of sadness is often mirrored in the repeated rituals of the church, as Susan Brinkmann shares, “every time a couple sees a child or attends a baptism...the pain of infertility may surface anew” (Brinkmann, 2008). Her sentiments reflect those of many other women who find themselves in the same circumstance of life.

This brief excursion into the world of those eager to conceive is reflective of the pain and isolation felt by some. Inadvertently, the Church may have contributed to this marginalisation. However, the opportunity for ecclesiastical realignment is there and, as Lowrie observes:

The childless are in crisis. Childless Christians are leaving the church wounded and lonely, yet the Christian faith holds a unique message that can speak powerfully into this desperate crisis of identity and purpose, and I believe it’s time for the church to say something. (Lowrie, 2017).

This research will endeavor to address these concerns, raised by Lowrie, by exploring theological and practical recommendations with a view to creating a more inclusive community for those who feel a degree of exclusion within the PCI.

1.5 Purpose of the Study

It is clear from what has been discussed that some parishioners have been struggling with the issue of involuntary childlessness. The result is that some feel they are left to struggle in silence and understand their place or role within God’s redemptive community. Such feelings of isolation can often be compounded by the deafening silence of local pastors and congregations on this subject. When this occurs, it can only be to the detriment of the individuals and the local church, in general. In Chapter Two of this thesis the global impact of infertility will be considered whilst also evaluating PCI’s pastoral response to this issue. Another important aspect of childlessness relates to the extent, if any, that current biblical

theology on procreation and family life has contributed to any sense of marginalisation and the possible, and perhaps unintentional, devaluation of marriage without children. For example, as a Reformed denomination, the PCI believes that God has made promises to the parents of children and these promises are both remembered and celebrated through the act of baptism, which, from observation and the writings of others, cause immense pain to childless couples. In the light of all these existing factors, the objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the lived experiences of the PCI parishioners contending with involuntary childlessness.
2. To determine, more specifically, the extent to which this hurt, and disconnectedness exist, and to identify some of the associated contributory factors.
3. To evaluate the perceptions of both clergy and laity with reference to baptism and how this impacts congregational life for those contending with infertility.
4. To assess the level of priority given and pastoral care provided to the PCI parishioners experiencing infertility and how those who participated in the study perceive such practices.
5. To suggest a renewed focus on ecclesiology seen through the lens of eschatology, thus, fostering more inclusive covenant communities, which will most likely require a change in the baptismal liturgy that reflects our status as spiritual siblings.

While much anecdotal evidence exists within the PCI amongst pastors and parishioners as to the ‘hurt’ felt within congregations, there remains a significant gap in the literature relating to these issues which would give a better understanding of such experiences. Therefore, the research seeks to articulate the thoughts and feelings of childless couples worshipping in what has often been described as ‘family-centred’ churches. It is hoped that the findings from this study will assist the church to improve pastoral care and revise areas of congregational life so that the pain arising from these issues can be more effectively understood and lessened rather than allowed to intensify.

The current denomination's lack of focus on these matters has caused reciprocal damage or at least prevented the church from effectively addressing an important pastoral need. The expectation of change comes from some hopeful signs of a willingness on the part of the church to change its thinking as seen in the following declaration:

[We need to develop] . . . a culture that needs to undergird all congregational life. Building the community life of the church is an essential priority emerging in areas of pastoral life, discipleship, leadership, worship and, by extension, outreach. If we are to care for one another, walk with one another in the journey of faith, lead and follow together as one in a shared direction and worship with one another in ways that are more than mere consumerism, then we need to share life together at more than a superficial level. In a world that is lonely and fractured, that community will bear witness to others. (PCI General Reports 2019, 221)

1.6 Research Questions

Based on the stated objectives, the following research questions emerged regarding the parishioners and the clergy who minister to them. From the parishioners' perspective these are:

1. What are the varying experiences that the PCI parishioners feel while trying to conceive a child?
2. Have these parishioners felt excluded from any church rituals, activities or events?
3. How has their infertility affected their perception of God?
4. What are some of the factors that contribute to them feeling like this and why?

Whilst evaluating clergy opinion and practice regarding baptism and how this might impact childless couples, the following seemed to be useful questions to ask:

1. Is the clergy aware of the negative feeling's baptism might stimulate among childless couples?
2. To what extent do the clergy include the congregation in the act of baptism by making it a celebration for the entire church community?

3. Have the clergy ever prepared and preached a sermon dedicated to the topic of infertility?
4. Have the clergy ever considered that by teaching that covenant promises are extended to the children of parents, that such teaching may cause hurt to some childless couples?

As the issues of pastoral care features significantly in the life of the church, it will be necessary to seek answers to these questions:

1. To what extent do parishioners experiencing infertility feel supported by the denomination?
2. Are these parishioners aware of the PCI literature written in support of those experiencing infertility?
3. If support has been provided, by whom and what was the nature of the support provided and how helpful did they find it?
4. What, if anything, do childless couples believe the clergy/church could do to help them through the experience of involuntary childlessness?

1.7 The Research Design

Once the purpose of the study was clarified and the appropriate research questions constructed, it was necessary to identify suitable participants. The experience of infertility within the PCI has a dual nature; its primary impact is upon those who are contending with the experience of involuntary childlessness, but it is also part of a deeply pastoral issue encountered by the clergy. Therefore, it was considered advisable to extend the research to include people from both categories, albeit for different reasons and employing different instrumentation to collect the data. The parishioners were the primary focus, and their data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The clergy, on the other hand, complemented those findings and further extended the field of knowledge by completing a questionnaire. Some questions in the questionnaire were open-ended, allowing both the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to be conducted within the framework of qualitative research.

The rationale for engaging both groups and using different instrumentation for collecting the data will be comprehensively presented and discussed in Chapter Three. Nevertheless, it was critical that the instrumentation could effectively collect data that would explore the rich and ‘thick description’ of human experience.

1.8 The Rationale and Significance of the Study

The findings resulting from this formal research, especially from those providing pastoral care to congregants, should fill a significant gap in the literature on this topic generally, and more specifically within the PCI. In the latter case, as the journey of those experiencing childlessness is heard, understood, and appreciated, then hopefully, the key stakeholders within the denomination will be motivated to address this problem and reconsider making it a priority and formulating proposals for better practice. Thus, the results of the study will not only add to the theory on the topic but should also help to inform practice as the need for this is becoming increasingly apparent. Whilst the *Close to Home* booklet was written to primarily resource biological families and encourage discipleship within the domestic unit, it observes that “The PCI council for Congregational Life and Witness continues in its aim to enable congregations to equip and encourage parents in their crucial role of passing on faith in Jesus to their children within the context of a strong covenant community of God’s people” (PCI Close to Home 2016, 2). Therefore, this research should enable further discussion on what a strong covenant community looks like, which by definition and practice should include those contending with childlessness, and emphasise that, within the biblical context, ‘covenant’ did not necessarily mean a biological tie. In the 2019 General Assembly reports, the Council for Congregational Life and Witness also recognised the importance of covenant community when they wrote:

There are many facets to the life and witness of any congregation. Developing our *life together* (italics mine) as the people of God in a local church entails a complex mix of worship, pastoral care, discipleship, leadership, outreach and sharing in God's wider work in the world. It involves men, women, old, young, families, singles, members who are passing through all sorts of life circumstances, happy and sad. (PCI General Assembly Report 2019, 220)

This is an encouraging perspective in that the PCI membership is seeking to live their lives together. However, the ramifications of this need to be worked out more fully within the broad range of relationships between congregations and the wider denomination.

1.9 Limitations

The merits of quantitative and qualitative research will be explored further in Chapter Three. Nevertheless, a brief summary of the differences between these research methods will help establish which approach(es) is appropriate for this research. When factual data is required to answer the research question, and it is necessary to isolate and define variables to form hypotheses, then quantitative methods are important ways of measuring the collection of data. When statistical significance has been reached, the researcher may seek to generalise their findings. Mayring has described the logic or process of generalisation in the following terms:

The formulation of more general statements is only possible by abstraction. This conclusion is called induction. The general formulation can be linked with other, formerly developed general formulations to a network of statements, a theory. The advantage of those theories is that we can apply them to new situations, which we don't have to explore over again. This conclusion is called deduction. Such a proceeding seems to be very useful, that is, it appears to be at the core of scientific work. (Mayring 2007, 3)

Yet, as will be argued, in Chapter Three, since a critical realist position has been adopted for the study, there is therefore no need to make such generalisations as qualitative research framed within a CR epistemology is not required to generalise any research findings.

With this being the case, the validity of the research will not be affected. However, given that the study focuses primarily on the lived experiences of parishioners, a qualitative approach has been adopted in order to provide a rich and ‘thick description’ of human experience. As Hammarberg claims:

. . . when other kinds of data are gathered in order to answer questions of personal or social meaning, we need to be able to capture real-life experiences, which cannot be identical from one person to the next. Furthermore, meaning is culturally determined and subject to evolutionary change. . . . Quantitative studies generally involve the systematic collection of data about a phenomenon, using standardized measures and statistical analysis. In contrast, qualitative studies involve the systematic collection, organization, description and interpretation of textual, verbal or visual data. (Hammarberg, Kirkman and De Lacey 2016, 499)

When data is collected in this way, it confirms the observations of Regoli, who claimed, “Different people will have remarkably different perceptions about any statistic, fact, or event. This is because our unique experiences generate a different perspective of the data that we see” (Regoli 2019, 4). It was thought that the data embedded in human experiences were more effectively retrieved through the use of using qualitative methods since the research objectives were not about analysing the quantitated data and identifying the sheer number of people affected with this issue. Instead, the focus was to present a thicker description representative of the wide range of human experience.

1.10 Definitions of Terms

1.10.1 Infertility

The definition for infertility is used in two ways. First when considering the global literature, infertility will be defined by the WHO as, “infertility is a disease of the male or female reproductive system defined by the failure to achieve a pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse” (WHO 2009).

1.10.2 Involuntary Childlessness:

This thesis refers to involuntary childlessness as the process of not being able to conceive after having an expressed desire to do so. For the sake of stylistic variation in writing style, terms like infertility and childlessness will also be used, but one should assume that this refers to involuntary childlessness unless the context suggests otherwise.

1.10.3 Assisted Reproduction:

The following terms are used with reference to these assisted reproductive technologies (ART). *IVF* is a process where “mature eggs are collected (retrieved) from ovaries and fertilized by sperm in a lab. Then the fertilized egg (embryo) or eggs (embryos) are transferred to a uterus” (Mayo Clinic, 2021).

IUI (Intrauterine insemination) is a fertility treatment that involves directly inserting sperm into a woman's womb (NHS UK, 2021).

ICSI (Intra-Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection) is a process whereby a “single sperm is selected by an embryologist, taken up in a fine glass needle, and injected directly into each egg. The fertilised egg (blastocyst) is then transferred into the womb in the same way as an IVF cycle.” (Complete Fertility Centre, 2017)

1.10.4 Biocentric:

Since this thesis is considering involuntary childlessness, the primary use of the term refers to a preoccupation with biological family units, over and against, all other forms of human relationship. Nevertheless, when considering the covenant community, it could refer to any family unit, biological or otherwise, where a preoccupation in focus and provision may inadvertently exclude others.

1.10.5 Secondary Infertility:

This is generally defined as those who undergo difficulty conceiving or bringing a pregnancy to full term after having successfully given birth to previous children.

1.11 Organisation of the Study

The structural framework of this thesis is spread over eight chapters. Having been introduced to the context and necessity of the research in this chapter, Chapter Two then covers a more expansive review of the literature considering both the global and national impact of infertility. The rationale for moving from the historical context of PCI to a wider global context was as follows. Firstly, this was undertaken to illustrate how pervasive the experience of childlessness is throughout the world, and secondly, to highlight the diverse cultural contexts through which men and women have had to experience infertility. Thirdly, and most importantly for this research, it collated responses to childlessness that were common to many people, regardless of their cultural and geographical differences.

The review then considered the ecclesiastical context with particular attention being given to how individuals have experienced infertility as members of a Christian faith community. Having evaluated the nature of that relationship, it continued by examining the biblical and theological response of churches in general to the subject of infertility. The chapter concludes with refining that focus by considering specifically PCI's response to infertility, identifying some of the remaining gaps in the literature on the topic.

Chapter Three describes the methodologies and methods used to position this research within an epistemological framework and determine which method is consistent with the methodology. The data was collected from both clergy and parishioners; albeit, for different but complementary reasons. Both sets of data were then interpreted using qualitative

methods, being careful to demonstrate rigour, reliability and possible transferability of results, where applicable.

Chapter Four will contain the data retrieved from both the questionnaires distributed to the clergy and the semi-structured interviews conducted with parishioners. The chapter will begin to explore the lived experiences of those contending with involuntary childlessness within the denomination and include some of the attitudes, opinions and practices of the clergy in relation to involuntary childlessness and the sacrament of baptism.

Chapter Five begins the process of exploring the possibility of undertaking a sacramental and liturgical review in the light of the findings of chapter four.

Chapter Six provides theological reflection emanating from the research. This chapter will provide the basis for examining and revising our ecclesiology through the lens of eschatology. It will be argued that this is a more appropriate model to understanding the responsibilities of covenant relationships.

Chapter Seven presents pragmatic responses arising from the contributions made by the participants. The findings in this chapter will enable both the PCI and the wider Christian church to form more inclusive communities, ones that are mindful of the challenge that involuntary childlessness poses.

Chapter Eight contains the conclusion and recommendations arising from this research. This final chapter will seek to summarise what has been learned and propose potential areas for further study as it relates to the experience of childlessness with the PCI and beyond.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Introduction

A review of the literature identified a large volume of resources revealing the depth of the research available on involuntary childlessness and the experience of infertility as a global phenomenon. As such, this has attracted much scrutiny by social scientists, medics, theologians and academics alike.

This literature review will firstly consider the medical definition of infertility within a global context before exploring the impact of infertility within various societies, including cross-cultural factors contributing to associated negative feelings and responses. The third section of this chapter will then review a range of experiences within churches; some scholarly responses to the subject of infertility within the Christian tradition, including biblical studies and systematic theology and an examination of the literature pertaining to PCI.

In the latter case, it was observed that there were few resources available from within PCI on the topic, especially from those undergoing the experience of infertility. Their voices seemed to be marginalised or totally absent from the discourse. Therefore, a review of the Church's documents on the topic was considered necessary and in keeping with one of the objectives of this study which was to assess the level of priority given and pastoral care provided to PCI parishioners experiencing infertility.

2.1 Infertility Defined Within a Global Context

The World Health Organization (WHO) has medically defined infertility as “. . . a *lack of conception after at least one year of unprotected sexual intercourse.*” (WHO 2009, 3).

In some countries, the clinical definition and period of time lapse before treatment can begin, can extend up to two years.² The WHO recognises this extended timeframe under the category of ‘epidemiological infertility’ and, in the case of demographic studies, may be extended to five years (WHO 2004). However, for the purposes of my research, infertility will be defined as the inability to conceive within two years as this is the duration of time required in Northern Ireland before assisted reproduction can begin (NICE, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence). However, the question arises as to just how extensive this condition may be on a global scale. In 2021, the extent of global infertility was estimated by WHO, as affecting 48 million couples and approximately 186 million individuals (WHO 2021).

According to a comprehensive review on the topic, Direkvand and Moghadam, Sayehmiri and Delpisheh, determined that there are no universally agreed reliable estimates for the global prevalence of infertility. The studies examined by these researchers, evaluated the prevalence of infertility in the general population; the total female population; women and couples. Some studies defined infertility as failure to conceive within 12 months of regular sexual intercourse without contraception while other studies defined it as failure to conceive within 24 months of regular intercourse without use of contraception. Overall, 52 studies met their inclusion criteria with the authors proposing that the global infertility rate was approximately 10% (2014, 35).

Gurunath et al., also accepts that there is a difficulty in reaching a consensus as to what the global figure for infertility might be due to the absence of an agreed definition

² Not only where the birth rate is legally constrained, for example, in Japan but also in Northern Ireland where this research project will be located. A helpful document summarising their assessment and treatment of infertility in Northern Ireland is found on their website.

(2011). The process of reaching that decision is complicated, “because study populations vary by age range, unit of measurement and relationship status” (Datta et al, 2016, 2109). Nevertheless, according to Mascarenhas et al., it can be estimated at approximately 48.5 million couples worldwide (2012). Sharma, Mittal and Aggarwal in 2009, proposed that the rate of infertility in the UK was estimated at 8-10% of all those seeking to conceive and the global figure somewhere between 8-12% worldwide although such figures may disguise a wide variation both between and within countries (2009, 77). For example, Larsen claimed that infertility was as high as 16% in sub-Saharan countries (2000) with Dutta purporting that one in six couples in India are childless (2007). Inhorn also claimed that prevalence in Namibia could be as high as 32% (2003). Whilst the problematic nature of gathering accurate global data is recognised and no consensus of definition agreed upon, Sharma, Mittal and Aggarwal, claim that, “the highest prevalence is in low resource countries, particularly in the sub-Saharan Africa where infection-related tubal damage is the most common cause” (2009, 77).

While medically recognised on a global scale, infertility is also perceived to affect the individual at a holistic level, impacting the physical, psychological emotional, social and spiritual dimensions of their lives (Romeiro et al. 2017). The next section of this chapter will focus on some of the social implications of infertility within a variety of contexts.

2.2 Social considerations

2.2.1 Social Alienation and Personal Exclusion

Rites of passage, initiation ceremonies, marriage and relational bonds are all manifestations of the importance of community integration and social cohesion. Such rituals create a sense of belonging and preparation for social integration which begins from

childbirth. Therefore, any forced exclusion from marriage, family or community due to infertility will have a significant impact on those excluded. This is particularly so since the imposition of infertility is beyond the control of the individual. It is not a situation they can necessarily remedy by a change of attitude or disposition to repair such relationships.

The consequences of this condition are negative as individuals (usually women) can often find themselves being divorced because of an inability to conceive and not because of a perceived flaw in their character or conduct. When this becomes a reality, for many it may mean more than simply the end of a relationship (Naab, Lawali and Donkor, 2019, Tabong and Adongo, 2013).

For example, this can be seen in the case of divorce occurring in the *Bangangte* tribe of the Cameroon with the women, as a consequence of their childlessness, losing access to land owned by their husbands (Feldman-Savelsberg 1994). Likewise, an increase in divorce and instability in marriage is reported in Africa (Leke et al. 2004) and Gambia (Sundby 1997) as a result of infertility.

In Iran, the term ‘cold stove’ is used to refer to infertile couples, and under Article 9 of the family protection law, the termination of a marriage due to infertility is legally permitted and religiously sanctioned (Abbasi Shavazi 2005). Further research conducted in Iran identified the following consequences of infertility divided into five main categories:

- (i.) Violence, including psychological violence and domestic physical violence;
- (ii.) marital instability or uncertainty; (iii.) social isolation including avoiding certain people or certain social events and self-imposed isolation from family and friends; (iv.) social exclusion and partial deprivation including being disregarded by family members and relatives and reducing social interactions with the infertile woman; and (v.) Social alienation. (Hasanpoor-Azghdy, Simbar, and Vedadhir 2014, 131-8)

Such sentiments and practices are the norm in many other countries. In many cases, where the fear of abandonment and polygamy is present, reported cases of verbal abuse and victimisation also co-exist. For instance, infertile women in Cape Town are sometimes referred to as *Idlolo*, meaning barren and *stjoekoe*, meaning failure (S.J. Dyer et al. 2002a; B. Dyer 2010). Such abuse is often accompanied by a personal perception of uselessness and social inferiority (Lunenfeld, Van Steirteghem, and participants 2004). It should be noted that while much of the research on social inferiority has focused on women, other studies have also demonstrated its prevalence among childless men (Fieldsend and Smith 2021, Hadley 2012, Hanna and Gough 2015).

Likewise, in Africa, fertility may even be contrasted sharply with infertility as high rates of fertility and infertility coexist in what is sometimes known as ‘barrenness amid plenty’. As a consequence, high fertility is often indicative of children being highly desirable (Inhorn and Patrizio 2015) while infertility leaves one at a social disadvantage, unable to ‘contribute’ to the community in the most meaningful way.

Bochow also described the experience of infertile women in Botswana as a type of ‘social death’ and thus intensified the advocacy for assisted reproduction (Bochow 2012; Dhont, Busasa, and Gasarabwe 2012). Even after death, exclusion still may occur as Ademola reports that, historically, among the *Ekiti* of Southwestern Nigeria, infertile women are regarded as outcasts, and after death their bodies are burned and buried outside the town (Ademola 1982). To make matters worse, as they approach old age, infertile women could be regarded as a disposable segment of the family and the wider community (Woodruff et al. 2010).

These individual responses, set within the wider social narrative reveal that the feelings of alienation and personal exclusion are often exacerbated by societal attitudes and structures. The social and economic framework underpinning many communities reveals how adversely some people are affected by prenatal policies and attitudes. Therefore, the impact this has upon both their experiences, emotions and social engagement needs to be examined. In doing so, I can then determine to what extent the structures, attitudes and practices of the PCI have made the journey with childlessness, for some, even more distressing.

2.2.2 The Social and Psychological Impact of Infertility

First of all, childlessness carries a heavy psychosocial toll for women often in the form of personal distress, depression, anxiety and, depending on the sociocultural context, it may also lead to marital discord (Greil, Slauson-Blevins, and McQuillan 2010). For example, Wood reported on a study from India which showed that infertility had, for most, a discernable negative effect on marital satisfaction, with women experiencing the greatest impact. Furthermore, Ganth (2013) maintained that women in India are not only regarded as the producers of sons but are also expected to contribute towards productive labour. Therefore, a woman's inability to have children further increases her vulnerability in an economy where the production of children is seen as a source of labour and a means of securing an income and a legacy.

Likewise, in China, this inability to 'provide labour' where interfamilial dependency is promoted, can have major implications for the childless couple. The stated one-child policy and the existence of childless individuals or couples has resulted in significant hardships experienced by the elderly including financial insecurity, higher levels of depression, loneliness and lower life satisfaction when compared with their counterparts in the West

(Zhang et al., 2007, Logan 2019). Chen also discusses how ancestral worship in some parts of China creates pressure on fecundity, making infertility in the Chen clan a significant problem (2006, 157).

In addition to the psychological distress experienced, infertility may also result in violence against women (Widge 2002) as detailed by Darr (2001). He reported that in the region of Andhra Pradesh, India, 70% of women experienced punishment through physical violence as a result of failing to produce children, with 20% reporting this to be severe. According to Abolfotouh et al., in Saudi Arabia, “Women are verbally or physically abused in their own homes, deprived of their inheritance and sent back to their parents, or even have their marriage dissolved or terminated if they are unable to conceive” (2013, 571).

However, the literature would suggest that such extreme attitudes and behaviour towards those experiencing infertility are not necessarily reflected globally. In contrast to physical violence, much of a woman’s distress is psychological and can arise from her perceived identity of being a ‘proper woman’.

Whilst elements of modernity have changed attitudes towards infertility in Bulgaria, according to Todorova and Kotzeva, subtle forms of cultural stigmatization still occur, most notably in the form of identifying a “true” woman as a mother and also through symbolic or self-exclusion from family and social life when it revolves around children (2003).

Hollos, in evaluating the theory of “modernisation” in two communities in southern Nigeria, contends that whilst modernisation had resulted in higher education and autonomy, it had not resulted in the decline of religious belief. In summarising the impact that some forms of Pentecostalism have had on those facing childlessness, Hollos observed:

[Pentecostalism] respond[s] to women's modern aspirations for material goods, for alleviation of kin obligations, and for personal spiritual advancement. On the other hand, these churches have capitalized on women's disappointment with or mistrust of modern biomedicine to offer spiritual remedies as a substitute for modern medical treatment. The prosperity gospel in particular has also only heightened the already considerable pressure women feel to conceive their own children, further invalidating available alternatives such as fostering and adoption. Perhaps only the introduction of an effective social security system that functions outside the realm of kinship can change this situation. For the time being, however, not having children of their own is no more socially viable for modern Christian women in Nigeria than it was for their premodern ancestors. (Hollos 2008, 43)

The connection between motherhood and the making of existential meaning has been alluded to in previous research (Batoool and de Visser 2016; Cunningham and Cunningham 2013; S.J. Dyer et al. 2004; Mogobe 2005; Silva et al. 2012; Prinds et al. 2014). The partnership between inner meaning and conception has been inextricably interwoven (Park 2017), with failure to conceive contributing to a loss of identity and purpose (Seybold 2002). The rupturing of the self and the fragmentation of our human ontology (Jones 2001) where the barren womb becomes the very embodiment of an empty life and the body becomes trapped in a race against time. No longer does time function as a progressive movement, but it has become eclipsed by a monthly cycle of anxiety, hope, and expectation, overshadowed by disappointment and despair with each unsuccessful conception (B. Dyer 2010; McQuillan, Stone, and Greil 2007).

Lois Tonkin, whilst conducting research on circumstantial childlessness writes:

As a counsellor working with several women who were circumstantially childless these women came to counselling with a range of issues related to their feelings of loss. But a common theme was a sense that what they described as their 'childlessness'- and their grief response to it – was misunderstood, criticised or unacknowledged. At times they felt harshly judged by others in their social worlds, and they often spoke of a distressing and lonely sense of inauthenticity in their lives; a jarring disjuncture between the 'mask' they were required to wear socially and the hidden face of their painful feelings about not having a child. Many invoked the popular metaphor of a 'biological clock running out', talked about their 'window of opportunity' for having a baby

closing in terms of their natural fertility, and expressed a sense of anxious urgency about having a child while it was still possible for them to biologically do so. (Tonkin 2014, 2)

This sense of loss is not only thought of in terms of grief, but also loss of control and feelings of helplessness (Cunningham & Cunningham 2013, Toscano & Montgomery 2009). Some childless couples refer to the frustrations and accompanying feelings of self-loathing and resentment at not being able to plan their futures. As time progresses, some evaluate their lives in terms of personal failure (Batool and de Visser 2016; Behboodi-Moghadam et al. 2013; Benasutti 2003; Cunningham and Cunningham 2013; S.J. Dyer et al. 2002b; S.J. Dyer et al. 2004; Lee et al. 2009) while others described their lives as experiencing trauma (Peddie, Teijlingen, and Bhattacharya 2005).

While many behaviours and psychologies resulting from infertility seem to be in concordance within a global context, the question arises of whether the perceived materialistic and technological advantages associated with ‘the West’ has removed any negative impact of childlessness upon its citizens? The following section considers how those, particularly within western society have experienced involuntary childlessness.

2.3 A Western Perspective

Payne, based on the National Infertility Awareness Campaign (NIAC) of 1997, maintained that among the nine hundred and eighty people surveyed in the UK, there was a wide range of negative emotions experienced by the respondents. The findings suggested that one in five had experienced suicidal feelings and depression following unsuccessful infertility treatments (2019, 1). This prompted a similar study to be undertaken by Payne, Seenan, and Akkar in 2016 using the 1997 survey as a baseline study. The 2016 survey was promoted by Fertility Network UK and involved seven hundred and sixty-nine participants and was

designed to investigate the occurrence of a variety of emotions, including suicidal feelings, depression, isolation, frustration, and anger (2019, 2). The study concluded that:

Compared to the 1997 NIAC survey, negative emotional impacts of fertility problems and treatment remained high. For example, those who responded to the current survey reported feeling, on average, sad, frustrated and worried almost 'all of the time', and 42% had experienced suicidal feelings at least 'occasionally', compared to 20% reporting suicidal feelings in the NIAC survey. There was no difference here between those who had not received treatment and those who were currently having treatment. Thus, in the present study, involuntary childlessness itself was distressing and receiving treatment did not appear to improve or reduce this. However, those most at risk of experiencing high levels of distress had only experienced unsuccessful outcomes, had spent longer trying to conceive, and had experienced some relationship strains. (2019, 6)

In another study, Fieldsend and Smith, using semi-structured interviews, interviewed four participants to investigate how male partners in heterosexual relationships with women aged between 45-54 had adjusted to midlife experiences of childlessness. They sought to interpret their findings using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Four interrelated themes were identified as part of the research: (1) the personal impact of loss, (2) losing interpersonal connections, (3) turning the loss into inner strength, and (4) reforming identity through nurturing relationships (2021, 5-10). Whilst the latter two emphasised the positive adjustments that took place, Fieldsend and Smith also concluded that, "the men in (their) study have revealed their sense of uncertainty caused by their loss of hope to have children. The unresolved outcome of childlessness, therefore, throws them into groundlessness in which childlessness seems to be perceived as a loss without closure" (2021, 11). Fieldsend and Smith contend that this mirrors similar experiences represented in research carried out among women, where individuals appear frozen in the grieving process, without clarity as to what has exactly been lost (2021, 11).

Another UK based study where Letherby interviewed twenty-four women using a 'life-history' approach within a feminist perspective, suggested that, "women with no children still

represent the 'other' in societies that value children and motherhood" (1999, 359). She also maintained that subsequent to the completion of her study, her respondents wrote and talked to her further about, "the stigma and sense of incompleteness they felt. Some did not feel negative themselves but felt that others perceived them as stigmatised. This included views of them as being less than whole, unfulfilled, pitiable and desperate" (1999, 363).

Stenström conducted research in Sweden and considered the experience of childlessness as it was expressed through blogs and Instagram. She believes that TTC ("trying to conceive," in online parlance) within digital environments, "form existential media and present existential arenas yet unexplored, as they relate to a stigmatized and silenced state" (2020, 3). Attempting to better understand the experience of infertility, Stenström used a combination of online ethnography whilst utilising the model of interpretative phenomenology during interviews with selected participants. In her research, three themes emerged revealing the 'most significant existential capacities' as: (1) shared vulnerabilities (2) the digital environment where TTC was a project of a child (to be) and (3) lost or future children and the existence or absence of motherhood (2020, 7). The findings concluded that in relation to shared vulnerabilities:

Constructions of "sisterhood" binding involuntarily childless women together are especially evident on Instagram. Other involuntarily childless women are often referred to as "sisters," either through hashtags or through descriptive text. A language of kinship thus highlights the bonds that women construct and maintain online based on shared vulnerabilities with previously unknown others. (2020, 8)

Stenström maintains that members of the digital TTC community, often refer to themselves as "fighters or warriors" engaged in a "journey or struggle", concluding that, "the digital platform enables hope, fears and wishes, along with concrete events, such as stages in treatment to concretize the (existential 'journey' of IF) into a timeline of posts" (2020, 10).

Finally, a legacy of sorts is created when, “the remembrance of a loss in early pregnancy, or even the wish for a future child, creates an online/digital existence for a child. Blogs maintained by dying individuals create digital archives that remain after their passing, thus, in some sense, sustaining their lives” (2020, 12).

While such media platforms have revealed positive aspects of the personal journey many women share when bonded by the struggle to conceive, it is important to note that even this bond can experience the heartbreak of departure and in so inadvertently adding to their pain. As Goldberg in the United States observes, “I still identify with infertility, as if it were a chip I’d been given in AA, though in AA, you can stay forever, whereas with the TTC community, you leave the minute you succeed.” The ones ‘left behind’ often feel abandoned in their inability to meet the requirements for the ‘welcome exclusion’ they long for (Goldberg 2014).

In another study conducted in Australia, Rich, Graham and Taket, applied qualitative methods framed within a tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology selected after sampling five IF women for her study. During her research, five themes emerged, (1) women = mother, (2) notions of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’, (3) childlessness as a discrediting attribute, (4) feeling undervalued, and (5) the significance of being childless (2011, 226-247). Their research findings maintained “that women and mother can often be presented as synonymous identities and experiences” (2011, 232). They also contended that the dominant discourse in Australia presented motherhood as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’, however, one participant observed, “her childlessness shifted something that was accepted and understood when she was younger to something that was rejected and perceived negatively as she aged” (2011, 235). It was also felt that whilst childlessness was not as stigmatised as it once was, that being childless “served as an attribute that was discredited” in their lived experience (2011, 236).

This led one participant to express, “it’s a nil thing, it’s a minus, it is not an attribute that is worth anything” (2011, 236). It was also suggested that whilst motherhood is undervalued, the position of non-motherhood receives an even lower status, coupled to the fact that the respondents felt “invisible” and unable to express opinions about family life because they lacked children. Such frustration led one participant to declare, “People like me, childless people, still care about the world and have things to contribute in terms of what life should be like for families” (2011, 241). Such a position emphasises that forced silence leading to invisibility is prevalent as the status of non-mother is devalued. Regarding the pressure on childless couples, Peterson and Engwall assert:

The female body’s reproductive capacity has been understood as the ontological foundation and defining feature of the category ‘woman’... Feminist theorists have criticized these essentialist ideas because they provide regulatory and oppressive evolutionary arguments for women’s subordination. When motherhood is defined as ‘natural’, non-motherhood becomes considered ‘unnatural’ and ‘unwomanly.’ (2013, 377-378)

It is, therefore, not surprising that for both men and women contending with involuntary childlessness, that they find societal perceptions and values often mirrored within the church community. In March 2021 the Church Times contained an article expressing both the possibilities of positive intervention and the fear of disabling practices within a preoccupation with fatherhood, when it stated that, “The Church can help, by providing sensitive support, or hinder, by focusing on families to the extent that childless people feel somehow lesser. In a culture that sees virility as a test of masculinity” (2021, 1).

The impact of infertility on the social and psychological well-being of individuals has been well documented, but significant attention has also been paid to the social framework

that either gives rise to the often-negative feelings experienced by those undergoing involuntary childlessness or the social factors that contribute to remaining childfree.³

2.4 Contributory Factors & Negative Impacts of Childlessness

As previously established, childlessness is a worldwide problem for both men and women although the reason(s) for and impact of this may vary due to social, cultural, and personal differences. Whilst the literature review has established that patriarchy and pronatalism are significant factors that influence social expectation and personal experience, other factors also impact the decision to begin a family.

2.4.1 Education

Education (or the lack thereof) has been cited as a significant contributory factor in both western and non-western societies that may delay or help influence the choice of whether/when to have children.

For example, in India, Baudin and Sakar observed that, “We evidence[d] a U-shape relationship [in infertility] and the educational attainment of women. This is a sign that poverty and opportunity driven childlessness co-exist in India” (2018, 18). To what extent ‘opportunity driven childlessness’ exists in other non-western countries would need further examination. Neither is it to suggest that poverty, class or race, does not contribute to a disparity in the western experience of childlessness.

³ Throughout the research the term ‘childless/ness’ is used interchangeably with the term ‘childfree’. By seeking to use the terms in this way recognises the difficulty of how the term is perceived by those who are undergoing the experience and those who have either chosen to be childfree or who have circumstantially or biologically not been in the position to have children.

Indeed, within a western context, Bell observed that women he interviewed from black, lower educated and working-class backgrounds were often discouraged from infertility treatment by medical professionals and dissuaded from pursuing pregnancy (Bell 2009, 688-709).

With reference to education, Berrington, within the UK, states that, “the proportion of women who remain childless among respondents with a tertiary education is roughly double that among respondents with no or less than secondary qualifications, i.e., the least educated” (2017, 64). This correlates with findings in France where it is maintained that women with fewer educational opportunities become mothers earlier and more frequently (Köppen, Mazuy, Toulemon 2017, 85). A similar pattern is found in West Germany where, “university educated women are substantially more likely to remain childless, than medium to lowly educated women” (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka 2017, 111).

However, it is important to stress that the correlation of higher education with high rates of childlessness is not always a uniform pattern, as Kreyenfeld and Konietzka contend, “In East Germany, the differences in childlessness rates by level of education are small. We even see that women without a degree are more likely to remain childless than women with a university or vocational training degree” (2017, 104). Nevertheless, in the same article Kreyenfeld and Konietzka stress that, “a very significant development is, however, the narrowing of childlessness by education among the recent female birth cohorts in West Germany” due in part in that, “highly educated women have profited more than less educated women from recent policy reforms, such as the expansion of public day care and the reform of the parental leave benefit system in 2007” (2017, 111).

Neyer, Hoem, and Anderson wanted to examine why women who had received a tertiary education in the health and education sectors were less likely to be childless than

other academic disciplines. In response to their findings they maintained, “the outcome of our investigation lead us to believe that the ways in which education and the labour market are intertwined may influence childbearing behaviour” (2017, 200). Yet, it has been argued that individual choice as opposed to institutional conditions may be a predominating influence (Neyer, Hoem, and Anderson 2017, 203). As Rotkirch and Miettinen maintain, “education is probably rarely the “direct cause for childbearing behaviour” (2017, 148). Their observation would concur with the wider literature that reveals many other social factors contributing to a childfree life in the West.

2.4.2 Personal Circumstance

The personal nature of the matter means that it can be difficult to determine exactly why childlessness exists at any given time. However, in all geographical contexts it should be acknowledged that an individual’s personal desires and priorities may alter throughout their life-course.

A woman may postpone the possibility of pregnancy only to find out later that they are unable to conceive. The decision to delay pregnancy may contribute to an individual initially gravitating towards voluntary childlessness. However, as time progresses it is only for them to realise that their experience of planning for a family has been impeded by involuntary childlessness.

Berrington writing within the context of the UK concluded:

Involuntary childlessness can arise for reasons other than health problems. The terms “childless by circumstance” or “social infertility” (which describe those who do not have a suitable partner, or who have a partner who does not want children) are used both in academic research. Indeed, while one member of a couple may be infertile or choose not to have children, for the other member this inability or unwillingness to have children may represent a circumstance which he or she has not chosen. (2017, 58)

Sabotka, analysing infertility trends suggested that, in western Europe, “childlessness trends have followed an asymmetric U-shaped pattern, starting from very high levels among women born in the first quarter of the twentieth century, reaching low levels among women born in the mid-1940s, and then rising again, especially among women born in the 1950s” (2017, 28). Factors that contributed to such high infertility rates have been identified as the cost of war and economic depression. Sobotka observes:

Women who were born in the early twentieth century had very high childlessness levels, as the family formation plans of many women were disrupted by the economic depression of the 1930s and by a lack of male partners after the First World War. Childlessness levels of women born between 1900 and 1911 approached or exceeded 20 % in all of the 13 countries with available data except Slovakia.

Rotkirch and Miettinen have also cited the fact that Finland lost 82,000 men in battle during the Second World War, which was thirteen times higher than other Nordic countries, suggesting that this is what led to a reduction in childlessness in the mid-1900s (2017, 144). Similar patterns were acknowledged elsewhere in Europe (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka 2017, 98).

2.4.3 Religious Beliefs and Values

One significant socio-religious area which must be considered as having an impact on attitudes and behaviours towards childbearing is that of religious values and persuasions.

This was shown to have some bearing on the rates of childlessness among non-religious cohorts in Switzerland where the incidence of childlessness was double that of both Catholics and Protestants (Burkimsher and Zeman 2017, 123). A comparable experience was noted in the USA when Heaton, Jacobson and Ning Fu concluded that the major finding of their study was, “that those with no religious preference, who never attend church, disagree with

traditional Bible beliefs, and have civil rather than religious wedding ceremonies are more likely than others to be, (voluntarily) childless” (1992, 225-253).

Specifically, within Northern Ireland, in a study analysing the data drawn from the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study covering 108,000 women aged sixteen to forty-four–years conducted by McGregor and McKee in the period 1997–2007 found that it supported the previously mentioned U-shape trend in fertility rates found elsewhere in Europe. They sought to analyse the distinct difference in fertility rates between Catholics and Protestants, concluding that the rate of infertility was 4% higher among Catholics when compared with Protestants although that difference is reducing without necessarily converging. Nevertheless, considering the pronatalist policy of the Roman Catholic Church and the relatively small margins of difference with Protestants, McGregor and McKee concluded, “the Catholic Church clearly can communicate its teachings, but the fertility evidence over decades is equally clear that it cannot enforce compliance” (2016, 618).

However, Northern Ireland, like the example of Switzerland and USA, reports lower fertility rates among those claiming no religious association:

The magnitude of the marginal effect comparing Catholics with former Catholics is larger than that between Catholics and Protestants. This suggests that the pure fertility impact of religion in this case is considerable since both groups would have a similar background. When such an analysis is carried out on Protestants, the results are similar but less robust. (2016, 618)

In other words, you are more likely to pursue the procreation if you align yourself with religious beliefs and practices.

It could be suggested that such research only identifies those who are circumstantially or voluntarily childless but has little bearing on considering the experience of those who are childless not by choice. Yet, the significance of the data should not be understated and

certainly must not be overlooked. While western countries may not embrace the extremes of marginalisation and accusation witnessed in other cultures, it clearly reveals its own form of pronatalism. What seems embedded in a *variety of cultures* regardless of *geographical location* is a desire for self-definition. In other words, how do I perceive myself in relation to personal ontology? When societal expectations and attitudes reinforce pronatalism pressures emerge both in terms of inter-personal relationship and social integration.

Reproductive loss, according to Jones, raises extremely important philosophical questions about the nature of self (Jones 2001). Feminist authors from different methodological perspectives believe that the associated sense of loss and personal failure is “shaped by powerful cultural assumptions about the value of motherhood” (Jones, 230). This unwelcome intrusion undermines personal fulfilment, social integration and human flourishing and is poignantly expressed by Jones when she proposes that:

To grow up a "woman" in this culture is to grow up formed by a thickly generated identity script wherein one's body is assessed in terms of its treasured capacity to give life and thereby to make one "a mother." To be a full woman is thus to bear children and then to lovingly raise them. Admittedly, this group takes different forms (often theological ones) depending on one's social location, and it thus affects person's self-understanding in different ways and to varying degrees. But even in the context of these differences, the force of this construction is strong, it's pull virtually inescapable. (2001, 230)

Even if men are the causal link to infertility, woman often are apportioned the blame. With reproduction and womanhood being so closely linked, Tiak concludes that women are often left to, “feel ashamed, frustrated, jealous, and envious when we cannot bear a child.” (Tiak 1999, 44). As the pressure to conceive intensifies, a loss of self can become relationally destructive leading Rosner to assert, “it often disrupts the ability to identify with peers and the wish for sameness; as a result, it is common for infertile women to find themselves alienated from surroundings that were previously a great support” (2012, 37).

The personal struggles of childlessness can be aggravated by a perceived stigma, real or imagined, that results in the concealment of infertility. There is a risk of disclosure as infertility is not always visible and the element of personal choice is still a possibility, until investigated by others. For some, disclosure is a dilemma as they risk feeling devalued (Rosner 2012). The concealment may have something to do with a sense of personal failure that has led some women to describe themselves as ‘defective’, ‘damaged’ or ‘neutered’ (Ryan 1994). Jones describes this as a ‘rupturing of the self’, an inability to know where they physically end and the outside world begins, with a loss of bodily integrity (Jones 2001). This loss is not only expressed in the failure of the body, but the death of hope, as Jones describes it when a pregnancy fails. This is what she says:

This known and yet unknown child (is experienced) not just as a “failing” but as “dying.” And with it dies a passionately imagined future, a future that is both the child’s and the woman’s. She thus grieves not only an immediate loss, but the loss of an entire lifetime, and a lifetime lived vividly in the drama of her hoping. (2001, 234)

Infertility is not only a present loss but also forever affects the future and Jones asserts it is a journey, “where the telos of maternity is radically denied” (2001, 237). It is this sense of social, psychological, and physical disfigurement or displacements that may lead to a feeling of marginalisation on the part of women.

Having reviewed a cross section of literature and research within the UK and Europe, at least three considerations can be made with reference to this research project.

1. The desire to delay, either in terms of education, career, or set of social circumstances has a significant impact on the pursuit of pregnancy. It will mean that for some; what began as an expectation or anticipation of future pregnancy, may end with an inability to conceive.
2. Brini maintains that “overall, research documents [suggest that] being religious positively affects the demand for children” (Brini, E. 2020). This observation was also made by Berghammer in Holland (2012, 197-212), Adsera

in Spain (2006, 205-221) and Frejka and Westoff in the US and Europe (2008, 5-31). Even if the gap between religious and non-religious procreative practices is closing, as some of these studies might suggest, when religious emphasis is on the importance of conception to fulfill a biblical mandate, then such a pressure of expectation or demand will lead to a sense of alienation and disconnect. This research affirms that when the PCI focuses on family life in terms of biology and kinship, it only serves to contribute to emotional negativity and the impact of remaining childless.

3. As Birni conducted a multilevel analysis of twenty European countries regarding fertility and childlessness, she observed that, “policies targeted at families with children” raised fertility rates particularly when those policies supported childcare and stability of motherhood by providing an economically viable work/home life balance. Therefore, any structural or institutional collaboration in supporting family life means that *policies and practices* are influenced, if not shaped, by pronatal ideologies (BRINI 2020).

As those experiencing childlessness engage in their faith community, they may experience similar pressures or assumptions. It is, perhaps, not surprising that for both men and women contending with involuntary childlessness, that they find societal perceptions and values often mirrored within the church community. In March 2021 the *Church Times* contained an article expressing both the possibilities of positive intervention and the fear of disabling practices within a preoccupation with fatherhood, when it stated that, “The Church can help, by providing sensitive support, or hinder, by focusing on families to the extent that childless people feel somehow lesser. In a culture that sees virility as a test of masculinity” (2021, 1). At this time, religious language, theology and expectations may be used to compound such individuals sense of failure, loss or incompleteness as will be explored later in the chapter.

The remainder of this literature review address various biblical and theological considerations and explore the area of infertility within the PCI.

2.5 Biblical and theological considerations

2.5.1 Ecclesiastical Formation and Experiences

Given the context of this study within the field of religion, the ecclesiastical aspect regarding infertility needs to be examined from the viewpoint of the church as well as that of the congregants. The church’s historical stance with regards to marriage was to view it primarily for the propagation of the species in keeping with *be fruitful* and *multiply* command given in Genesis. Richie, who writes from a Roman Catholic perspective, claims that

Augustine has left a legacy that has resulted in marriage being viewed as “primarily procreative and mutually desired non-productive sex as sinful” (2014, 19). Augustine demonstrates this point when he writes that, “. . . all intercourse necessary for generation is without fault” (1997a: Ch. 10 sec. 10). He suggests that the role of a prostitute is to provide sexual release while copulation with the wife, that is intended for this purpose, is against nature itself. He further opines: “. . . that use which is against nature is abominable in a prostitute, but more abominable in a wife that we suppose is how the creator determined it” (Augustine 1997a, Ch. 11 sec. 12).

Richie discusses the historical foundation that has led to a contemporary emphasis in the Roman Catholic Church on the procreative and unitive aspects of marriage, claiming that, “of the two dimensions validated within sex, the procreative, rather than the unitive has been emphasized, to the extent that the contemporary Catholic Church would still state that intercourse, “ultimately does not make sense unless both meanings (of sex) are recognised within each and every conjugal act” (Ritchie 2014, 23). While the Protestant churches may not have embraced this same emphasis, it is not entirely absent. Manson, in seeking to maintain a traditional view of marriage, declares that one of the “primary goods of marriage are procreation.” He observes that, “Most people within contemporary western cultures already regard marriage as essentially a companionate or emotional union.”⁴ Manson cautions against two conservative evangelical writer’s, claiming that nowhere in their work do they identify procreation as one of the central goods of marriage.⁵ He cites and supports

⁴ Manson is writing this article against the backdrop of his opposition to same sex marriages.

⁵ The writers he refers to are Timothy and Kathie Keller in their book, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York, Dutton, 2011). The second author is Paul Tripp. *What Did You Expect? Redeeming the Realities of Marriage* (Wheaton, IL, Crossway 2010). He is even more concerned about Mark and Grace Driscoll’s, *Real Marriage: The Truth About Sex, Friendship, and Life Together* (Nashville, Thomas Manson, 2012).

Christopher Ash's contention that, "Welcoming children (including nurturing them to serve God) is part and parcel of God's plan for marriage. If you regard children as a curse and don't want them, don't get married" (Manson 2014, 37). Such a view not only appears harsh and judgmental of voluntary childlessness, but also insensitive to those who are trying to conceive but have had no visible success. Ash's proposal also rests upon a particular understanding of the purpose of marriage and may influence some to question whether they have truly fulfilled God's objective for marriage, particularly if that marriage fails to produce children.

When reviewing the literature within Biblical Theology, patterns of consensus emerge that advocate procreation as highly valued, and that infertility often focuses on the female. Byron contends that, "childlessness, in the Hebrew Bible, is presented as a particularly female problem. No biblical stories centre on an infertile man, nor is the imagery of barrenness ever applied to a man" (2010, 20). However, he does acknowledge in a footnote that male fertility is implied in some cases, although the focus consistently falls upon the woman (Byron 2010, 20).

By inference, the biblical injunctions requiring the fidelity of human beings is rewarded with a 'fruitful land', devoid of barrenness (Ex. 23:26; Deut. 7:14). This may suggest that childlessness meets with the disapproval of God. According to Job 24:21, a woman is ranked among the despised if she is unable to bear children. Other verses, such as, Gen. 20:17; Num. 5:11-31 and 2 Sam. 6:20 could imply that childlessness may be the result of sin. However, the biblical narrative appears to suggest, that God is responsible for opening and closing the womb (Gen. 30:23). If it was perceived that the willingness of God was required to bless a procreative union with offspring, then to possess a marriage, devoid of children could be perceived negatively.

As such, remaining childless could be understood as a major disadvantage and some marriage contracts from antiquity contained clauses specifying what should be done if a woman failed to conceive. This usually affected her status in the home, with the possibility of divorce. In some cases, the husband was allowed to take on a second wife. The problem for the infertile wife was that she then lost her social and financial security (Byron, 2010), although, as Baskin points out, this was often the preferred option over divorce. Baskin maintains, however, that “. . . Passages in the Aggadah seem to indicate that the childless marriage was a situation in which human needs and feelings often overruled legal pronouncements” (Baskin 1989, 105).

If Baskin is correct that empathy may have circumvented legal entitlement, it is an acknowledgement that infertility was indeed a real existential crisis. As such, Roundsari, Allan, and Smith (2007) have suggested that many confronting the challenge of infertility today will also seek ways to cope with their experiences, and that, when facing this crisis, some people turn to spirituality for comfort, hope and relief from their distress. While acknowledging that religion is a place of solace and an opportunity to ‘promote wholeness’, for some however, it can also distort the concept of motherhood when it is seen as not just a divine responsibility when appropriated, but as a socially constructed experience that simply promotes wholeness (Jones, 2001). Therefore, it appears that social expectation is mixed with theologically engineered perceptions of what is the will and purpose of God for a woman (Jones 2001).

Kamua argued that among infertile couples in Nairobi, Kenya, religious teaching and beliefs were the second most dominant influence shaping their attitude towards infertility. She claims that they expressed a certain confusion surrounding their biblical understanding of infertility with the perception that it was either a curse or punishment. Often times,

deliverance from evil spirits was required for them to become fertile, and yet, pastors spoke of God being responsible for closing the womb (Kamua 2011, 103). This sense of confusion does not only pervade developing countries, as Frantz and Stimming, writing in the American context, claim that among their friends and relatives who have experienced reproductive losses, struggle “to make sense (of infertility) in the light of their understanding of God and the Christian life” (Frantz and Stimming 2005, 2). In some cases, this may lead to a loss of faith altogether. In a study, conducted by Berger one participant claimed, “it (infertility) strained my religious faith; I was angry with God and didn’t go to church for years.” (2013, 9). However, Berger in the same study observed that, two participants maintained that the experience of coming to terms with infertility had a positive effect on their faith (Berger 2013, 9).

Feske conducted her research among childless couples attending church and found that they felt isolated and lonely, especially since most churches focus their attention on families by providing many ministries directed towards supporting family life (Feske 2012). The awareness of being childless in a pronatalist society is thus intensified by attending church and, as Jennings maintains, “many of the women in (her study) reported that infertility made them feel out-of-place when they attended religious services and other activities at church or synagogue” (Jennings 2010, 11). Monroe, relating to her own experience of childlessness, writes, “the church we attended had 300 children. They announced new births, people held their kids during worship, and I cried every Sunday in church for about a year. I felt guilty over my anger, over my envy of others, over my lack of joy for their blessing” (Monroe 2005, 52). Morgan also comments that:

Infertility did terrible things to my relationship with God” (2013, 7). She describes how one fellow parishioner, in seeking to locate her suffering as a way of feeling close to God, left her feeling, “. . .furious. I felt no such closeness, only pain. I felt forgotten by God.” (2013, 7)

Particular events also aggravate their sense of loss, like Mothering Sunday/Mothers' Day, Christmas and Baptisms which were frequently mentioned. As Volf puts it, "At Christmas, I felt like the only child in a large family to whom the parents had forgotten to give gifts. Others' joy increased my sadness" (2005, 3). Insensitive comments also alienate, and cause hurt. In an online blog entitled, 'The Disgrace of Infertility', Pyle recollected how comments, such as, "Isn't it time the two of you start having kids?" simply compounded the problem. This is the sort of question infertile couples do not want to hear and it leaves them feeling isolated in a "shame-filled, silent trial, isolating couples in closed bedrooms of pain" (Pyle, Nate. 2017). In describing the experience as a 'closed bedroom of pain', Pyle conjures up the sense of marginalisation and exclusion felt as a result of remaining childless.

In one of the very few examples of literature on the topic written by PCI members, Dr Joanna Graham writes:

Occasions such as birthday parties, family gatherings, and Mother's Days at church were very difficult and yet the smile had to be on our faces for fear of making anyone else feel bad or uncomfortable. Sometimes I would feel physically sick or found it difficult to breathe if I thought about it too much. I would spend too much time in the shower crying with a deep sense of sadness and loss for something we never had. (Graham 2016, 18)

These responses indicate the pervasive pain of involuntary childlessness experienced in Christian communities. Miller claims that, "In our silence, we fail to provide the pastoral care that couples need amid the losses of infertility, and we leave them alone and bereft of guidance as they confront a bewildering array of possible technological interventions" (Miller 2007, 17). This admission of lack is supported by Gillies who states that, "the Christian Church has served neither practitioner nor patient at all well" (1994, 12). This observation is echoed in a report written by the British Council of Churches which suggested that:

It is the church itself that sometimes increases the strain. It can place so great an emphasis on marriage and family life that those who are unmarried or have no children feel themselves to be only second-class members. (Free Church Federal Council, British Council of Churches 1982, 18)

The literature so far has demonstrated the negative impact of infertility especially regarding women's status, social inclusion and emotional well-being and many have concluded that the church has failed to respond adequately to this dilemma. In light of this, the role of the church will be more closely examined in the next section.

2.5.2 Biblical and Theological Responses

With the awareness of the socially constructed and ecclesiastical inherited pressures placed on childless couples, what have been the responses within the Christian tradition? How have various authors sought to explain infertility as cited in the Bible, or alternatively constructed theological responses in an attempt to diminish its pain? This will now be examined in terms of biblical studies and systematic theologies.

2.5.3 Biblical Studies

As the global impact of patriarchy has been considered in its social context, theologians have also considered it within the field of biblical studies and various responses to the issue of infertility and the challenges it poses have emerged. Fuchs, writing from a feminist perspective, argues that all the biblical narratives dealing with infertility only serve to further the patriarchal system. She claims that those cases dealing with barrenness and the presentation of God as the sole proprietor and Master of Human life only serves to demonstrate that, "the recurrent motif is also motivated by the Bible's patriarchal ideology, which seeks to naturalise and legitimate man's political dominance" (Fuchs 1989, 152). She also claims in her article that God responded to Abraham's magnanimity, despite Sarah's pettiness, and that the wife's conception was attributed to the 'good relationship of her

husband to YHWH' (154). Similarly, Rachel's demand for children was construed as 'impetuous and immature' (Fuchs 1989, 155). If the women advocated or interfered in the story, it was only on behalf of sons and not daughters, thereby reducing women's parenthood to reproductive and protective functions (163).

If there is a growing sense of motherhood and a development of women's role in the narrative plot, it is only to serve. This is because the 'male control of female reproductive powers in conjunction with a patrilocal and monogamous marriage (the wife), secures the wife as the husband's exclusive property and ensures the continuity of his name and family possession via a patrimonial customs and patrilineal inheritance patterns" (Morris 2012) ⁶ (Fuchs 1989, 160).

In contrast to Fuchs, Bushnell, while maintaining her feminist position, contends that Sarah gives evidence of matriarchal customs based on Sarah being Abraham's half-sister on his father's side demonstrating (ancient near eastern) rules of 'female kinship' (2003, 474). She further proposes that God gave Sarah her own revelation, 'lest she should follow her own customs and remain with her kin' (277). Bushnell also contends that Sarah remained in her own residence assuming the role of 'tribal mother' (59) as her very name meant 'female prince or 'chieftainess' (530).

Baskin suggests that the 'barren matriarchs' accounts of God's response must have had a "singular and empowering resonance for women who could communicate so effectively with God (providing) spiritual sustenance to women in a society which limited their access to

⁶ Yet Morris claims that Paul's use of Sarah in Roman Ch. 4 and then Ch. 9v9-10 describing how the sons are born to Sarah and Rebecca and by, 'making the women the prominent parent certainly challenges the patriline of Rome pg109. She erects a case to suggest that the Roman laws passed in its final form of 9CE Lex Iulia et Papia Poppaea punishing men and women for not bearing children by imposing greater taxes, fines and restrictions had been countered by Paul teaching that on being adopted into the family of God challenges the concept of a childbearing mandate.

most avenues of religious affirmation” (Baskin 1989, 114). Havrelock argues that while it is true that much of the biblical narrative is directed towards motherhood, reproduction is not the only function and strength of females. Prophetesses are never noted as being mothers, and she concludes, “for those who do become mothers, the movement from barrenness to fertility depends on articulation, assertion and action as well as a heroic daring long remembered in the names they leave behind” (Havrelock 2008, 178). Walter Brueggemann’s idea of testimony and counter testimony is used by Michelle and Clifton-Soderstrom to demonstrate that rather than these women being “passive recipients of impossible circumstances but, exemplars of frustrated longings and enduring faith, their stories serve as oracles and reveal an eschatological telos, namely God’s promise of restoration” (Clifton-Soderstrom 2011, 48).

Having previously considered the viewpoints expressed by Moss and Baden (2015) what is most unconventional in their exposition of barrenness is the idea that infertility may indeed be God’s ‘default position’ for human beings. In tracing a journey from Eden without children to the ‘eschaton’ where procreation is not required, the trajectory of scripture may advocate a view of childlessness that pushes it towards an emphasis on spiritual community as opposed to a preoccupation with a biological mandate. This aspect of ‘spiritual community’ in the form of Christian siblings will be explored in chapter five.⁷

⁷ However, what did concern me as I read through their book is that no mention at all was given to verses that positively affirmed children and often by implication children were an acquisition, rather than a blessing. This research will examine in chapter five how biological siblings are to be incorporated into the Christian community, therefore, demonstrating the extent of covenant blessings as distinct from simply that of a biological one.

As theologians within the field of Biblical Studies have grappled with the biblical literature and the complexity of infertility, systematic theologians have also offered a perspective on the challenges that involuntary childlessness can create.

2.5.4 Systematic Theologies

As Cox asks, “Is our imagination and tradition supple enough to understand a man or woman as fully human, without being a biological parent?” (Cox 2013, 31). She uses Karl Rahner’s interpretation of Augustine’s view on concupiscence as a category to discuss finitude (nature) and human freedom (person). This concept introduces a lack of certainty regarding decisions made or actions undertaken. As a sum, there may be a remainder of sorts which is the risk that we may be wrong or indeed wonderfully right. Our freedoms can never totally master our finitude (nature) and in human passion, pain, suffering, fear, anxiety and death are the existential experience of our finitude. In relation to infertility, Cox claims that human beings experience the biological (nature), but they essentially manifest themselves in (personal) ways in relation to their identities and life narratives.

For Rahner, suffering occurs because it involves renunciation, the closing off of some possibilities. Cox writes, “This actually reveals itself when (couples or individuals) let go of (their) hopes for biological children” (2013, 49). Cox cites Mercy Obuyoye who said:

The infertile could claim that their lives were lived as a doxology to God, and that their creative command became “increase in humanity.” Multiply the likeness to God for which you have the potential. Multiply the fullness of humanity that is found in Christ. Fill the Earth with the glory of God. Increase in creativity. Bring into being that which God can look upon and pronounce, ‘good’ even ‘very good’. (Cox 2013, 51)

Jones suggests that elements of feminist theology may present problems for infertile couples, particularly the belief that a woman is a “choosing agent” or “self-creation”, creating her own world of desire, whereas in fact, she may, because of infertility, Jones claims, have a

“thwarted capacity for self-creation” (2001, 237). Another feminist reflection is ‘care’ and ‘relationality’. Here, the ‘self’ is understood to be the capacity to attend to the particular, not universal needs of others. “Rather than emphasizing the rigid boundaries of the self-possessed self, this self is relationally more fluid. Herself comes into being through the play of her interactions with those around her” (2001, 237). The problem with infertility is that “the embodied site is marked by its inability to care (in a very profound sense) for the other. Her body is a place where nature is in decline, where death dwells, where the telos of maternity is radically denied” (2001, 237). A third element is what post-structural feminists call ‘the ruptured subject’ with multiple discourses in an ever-changing locus of human experiences. “She resists any attempt to locate her identity in the stability presupposed by narrative assumptions about time and space” (2001, 238).

Jones turns to the doctrine of the Trinity to try to bring a sense of the eternal being into the pain and misery of infertility. She assumes that the Trinity is a ‘community of mutually indwelling persons’ (a community-of-persons as one God). Out of the Trinity, and as an act of creation, is born ‘the other’ and they receive love. Love without explanation they choose to reject, but God attempts to reach his broken creation through Jesus who dies and, in Jones’s words, “God refuses to turn from us, even in the most brutal grip of tortured death and divine abandonment, and instead takes death into Godself” (2001, 241). Jones claims that Moltmann and Luther have espoused this view, how it is re-presented by Jones is, that God’s own child dies and with it a death of hope, God is rendered helpless, incapable of stopping it and by letting it happens, and bears its guilt. In this dying, the borders of divine identity are also confused and made fluid as the one who is the source of life eternal bears now the stamp of complete, full death (2001).

Applying this to infertility, Jones postulates that the poetic move here is not to identify these women with God or vice versa, but rather to suggest a morphological space within which they might imagine God's solidarity with them as those who lose a future they had hoped for and who carry the weight of this loss inside them. As an image of God with them, this rupturing, anti-maternal tale of the Trinity may not stop their sorrow, but it might lessen their sense of isolation, which is no small step in the process of healing (2001).

In considering the global impact of infertility it was evident that personal exclusion and social alienation had been the experience of many. The experience of marginalisation is not confined to one set of cultural norms or limited to a particular geographical region. It appears that regardless of socio-economic diversity that exists people feel wounded by prenatal ideologies and practices. The literature suggested that within the western context (though not exclusively so) voluntary childlessness, for many individuals, may one day become involuntary and the experiences merge with those already experiencing social, ecclesiastical, and personal alienation and displacement. The fact that those who attend churches are not exempt from such feelings has been reflected in churches and theologians considering the challenge that childlessness brings. However, in order to meet the research objectives, it is time to review the response of PCI to what for some parishioners is a deeply troubling personal experience.

2.5.5 PCI, Infertility and Pastoral Concern

If current trends in infertility rates are maintained, there is concern that many more people will experience involuntary childlessness; consequently, more within the faith community will have to contend with the challenge that infertility brings. Aware that an increasing number of couples will be contending with childlessness, the PCI's somewhat muted concern is puzzling. Further, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) appeared

deficient in prioritising it as a contemporary pastoral concern. Indeed, it could be argued that this was not always the case because some years previously, PCI did appear, at least for a time, to wrestle with the pastoral challenges brought about by infertility.

In 1994 the PCI published a book called *Firm Foundations* with the remit to provide a study on the Westminster Confession of Faith. Every Presbyterian minister and elder in the PCI must subscribe to the Confession of Faith prior to ordination. In the section dealing with the origin and purpose of marriage, the PCI maintains that:

Marriage serves a number of purposes. It is for the mutual help of husband and wife, it provides the means to legitimately increase the human race, it also gives the Church covenant children, holy seed and it prevents immorality. (PCI Firm Foundations 1994, 91)

In 1999 PCI wrote, *Coping with Childlessness*, and this appears to be the only publication expressing the need to address the subject. The formulation of this booklet came under the remit of the Board of Social Witness and the panel referred to as the Social Issues and Resources Committee (SIRC). As a part of the remit issued by the General Assembly: they were to consider producing another publication because of the problems posed by infertility. However, there were some other competing concerns and for this reason, the minutes of the General Assembly reports were consulted to find out what concerns and intentions were under consideration.

In 2005, the SIRC in Point 7 of its report referenced:

Other issues currently under discussion include: the smacking of children in response to the 'Children are Unbeatable' campaign; how the Church might respond to issues such as transsexuality and potential gay marriage which have featured in recent legislation such as the Gender Recognition Bill, the Civil Partnership Bill and the recent consultation by the Office of the First & Deputy First Minister into Gender Equality in Northern Ireland. (PCI Annual Reports 2005, 199)

This provided some indication of the increasing concern regarding human sexuality and the prospect of government legislation and how this might impact the church. The question of morality, though important, did not eclipse other concerns as to the spiritual well-being of the parishioners. Elsewhere in the report, the Board of Social Witness included a report from the Marriage and the Family Committee. In that report, the Marriage and Relationship Counselling Service became the PCI Counselling service. Under Point 2, the PCI Counselling Service admitted that greater demands had required its expansion to deal with many issues under Point 2 “including adultery, sexual, physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, depression, sexual orientation, debt and relationship problems” (PCI Annual Reports 2005, 196). While it was reasonable to assume that involuntary childlessness might be included in some of these categories, it was not mentioned explicitly. However, the direction of the counselling service was now directed toward sexual orientation and the pastoral concerns surrounding same-sex attraction.

Nevertheless, regardless of the increasing concern of PCI in relation to sexual orientation or identity, in 2006, they still recognised the challenge that infertility might pose. The committees and boards during 2005-2006 had gone through significant restructuring and two committees/working groups emerged that were pertinent to the current research. They were the Family Services Committee (FSC) and the Pastoral Care Committee (PCC). In the 2006 Annual Report of the General Assembly, the FSC asserted that, “a panel focusing on infertility and childless issues is currently in the process of producing a series of leaflets that will be available to the wider Church” (PCI Annual Reports 2006, 190). By 2006, the PCI counselling service had to increase its counselling personnel from five to ten due to the demand, however no reference was made to having to counsel couples in relation to infertility or involuntary childlessness. In 2006, they elaborated further as to what were the ‘presenting

problems' within marriage. These included: marital drift (10%), adultery (12%), lack of communication (9%), domestic violence/abuse (7%), depression (10%), sexual abuse (8.5%), debt (7%), bereavement (7%), and not coping (7%). Then under a separate category, they revealed other issues that presented themselves during counselling, such as, low self-esteem, alcoholism, sexuality, anger, obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorder and anxiety. This diverse and full list made no mention of infertility or involuntary childlessness and it appeared that while the church recognised the impact that infertility had on the parishioners' lives, there was a reluctance to use the counselling service to help.

In the 2007 annual reports to the General Assembly, the FSC appear to not only be affirming their commitment to deal with the subject of infertility, but also to extend its range of services. Point 6 of their report asserted that, "a panel is continuing to look at the area of infertility and childlessness and is considering the need for a listening service" (PCI Annual Reports 2007, 168). The first recorded desire for a listening service was found in the General Assemblies Annual Reports of 2001. However, the 2001 report did not specify whether it was in relation to childlessness. The 2007 report was a welcome reminder given the acknowledged impact that infertility presented to some parishioners. But six years had elapsed without a significant development in the service provision.

However, it was in 2007 that for the first time an extensive report was given by the SIRP regarding pastoral guidelines on homosexuality. This was presented to the General Assembly in 2007 in response to a request of the 2006 assembly which stated, "that the General Assembly, recognising homophobic attitudes within our Church and society, request the Social Issues Panel to prepare guidelines to help our Church to develop more sensitive and effective pastoral care" (PCI Annual Reports 2007, 174). The report presented by the SIRP panel on pastoral guidelines on those involved in same sex attraction consisted of nine

full pages of concerns, documented stories, and recommendations that were both illuminating and helpful. The work was commended by the General Assembly and a resolution proposed to have the guidelines printed for consideration by ministers and congregations. The impact and possible reason for abandoning the concern for those experiencing childlessness will be discussed later in the study. However, the shift of pastoral focus towards those experiencing same-sex attraction was by now becoming the predominant concern.

The 2008 Annual Reports of the General Assembly again referred to the work of the PCI counselling service. Under Point 3, two further pastoral concerns were added to the list of presenting problems, namely, that of suicide and step-parenting, but still no direct reference to infertility or involuntary childlessness (PCI Annual Reports 2008, 182). However, what was highly significant was the omission from the report of *any* reference to the ongoing work about infertility and childlessness. This silence then extended to the proposed listening service for those contending with childlessness as a presenting issue. There was no mention of infertility or involuntary childlessness from the SIRP group, however, under Point 1, the SIRP was reflecting on the implementation of the recommendations of the ‘Guidelines on the Pastoral Care of Homosexuals’ (PCI Annual Reports 2008, 171) and Point 4 referenced initial discussions “regarding some of the complex pastoral issues ministers and elders have to handle, particularly in relation to marriage and the sacraments (baptism and communion).”

The annual reports of 2008 outlined clear objectives of what the Board of Social Witness wished to achieve. This was a clear attempt to focus their scope and concerns. In all, they had eight objectives with strategic objective four declaring that, “Family Services will promote family life and the general well-being of our members; continue to develop services for the disabled within the church; support the work of the Taking Care Office, PCI

Counselling, Presbyterian Family Holiday and South Belfast Friendship House” (PCI Annual Reports 2008, 167). In 2009, SIRC was in the process of revising the PCI resource booklet, *Getting Married*. Under Point 5 of the PCI Counselling Services report, reference was made to a 90-hour training session provided to their counsellors by ‘Relate’ (UK relationship counselling) in all the specialist areas, namely, managing conflict, communication, infidelity, rebuilding, addiction, step-families, and sexual abuse. Absolutely no reference was made to the possible strain on marriages that infertility or involuntary childlessness might cause. In the Annual Report of 2010, the SIRC under Point 2 made reference to chapters under production in the book *Getting Married*. Of particular interest was the desire to base it on the “foundational Biblical principles relating to the marriage relationship; information on marriage preparation; expectations and understanding entering marriage; helpful information on the legalities of the wedding service; *and on having children* (italics mine) (PCI Annual Reports 2010, 226). It would, therefore, have been reasonable to assume that voluntary or involuntary childlessness should have been examined in pastoral detail in this resource.

In 2011, the SIRC reported on its ongoing work on *Getting Married* and included reference to some leaflets under production about depression, fear, purity, worry, guilt, and bereavement. Thankfully, in 2011, they suggested that “others may be produced in the future to add to the list” (PCI Annual Reports 2011, 174). The PCI Counselling Service, due to demand, had increased its trained volunteer staff to 18 and concluded that 2011 was looking like, “It may be a difficult year for families, couples and individuals. Pressures of all kinds, including rising unemployment, increased costs of living, and numerous cuts to all political budgets can place people under much stress” (PCI Annual Reports 2011, 169). The 2012 Annual Reports of the General Assembly added little of significance, except that the Family Services Committee reiterated its pastoral responsibility with the assertion that “Family

Services is concerned with the ‘wholeness’ of the individual” (PCI Annual Reports 2012, 165).

Little reference was made between 2012-2015 in how they were seeking to fulfil their objectives to “promote family life and the general well-being of our members” (PCI Annual Reports 2008, 167). Then in 2015 the Boards and Committees of PCI were subject to restructuring. Emerging from those changes was an umbrella group known as the Pastoral Care Committee (PCC) which was asked, “to reflect on the production of the Fit for Purpose 2015/16 resource, *A Caring Fellowship*, as the current, popular level, denominational commentary on our understanding of pastoral care” (PCI Annual Reports 2015, 168-169). In subsequent literature, the PCI would refer to this as the Pastoral Triangle and, by 2017; it had updated its Pastoral Care Training Course, delivering two regional presentations in Comber and Coleraine. According to the Annual Reports of 2017, it was “considering how to build on the momentum around the issue of the church and mental health raised by the previous *Breaking the Silence* initiative where the committee had focused on ways to envision and equip the local congregation in ministering to those suffering in this way.” Consideration of promoting mental well-being was also to be included in the regional training (PCI Annual Reports 2017, 212). In the same year, the committee also commissioned a reprint of a booklet entitled, *Life after Loss: A Christian perspective on dealing with loss* (2017, 212). This new committee outlined in the 2016 Annual Reports its vision for the council, asserting that:

[we] have a vision for the development of the pastoral life of Congregations around the three interlocking themes of pastoral care (all of life understood through the lens of Scripture), pastoral community (space and place in congregational life for genuine sharing of lives with one another) and pastoral care (appropriate response to specific situations of need). (PCI Annual Reports 2016, 206)

PCC was now working under a new board called the Council for Congregational Life and Witness and, by 2017, the new board was asking questions like, “What does covenant

family ministry look like today?” (Launch of Close to Home resource and development of follow-up materials, PCI Annual Reports 2017, 205). Perhaps this resource would ask fundamental questions regarding what it means to be a covenant family beyond the biological bonds of parenthood. In 2018, the Pastoral Care Committee added two more areas of provision to be explored. The first was the prayer ministry as an aspect of pastoral care. It also set itself the task of ‘exploring the increasingly important, but largely uncharted territory, of faith in later years’ (PCI Annual Reports 2018, 240) and 2018 also saw the re-launch and rebranding of the PCI Counselling Service under the new name Fresh Light (2018, 240).

The PCI Annual Report of 2019, however, did reveal the pressures of competing demands when it said:

The committee is aware that many pastoral issues arise as a result of the rapidly changing and increasingly complex society in which we live. Undoubtedly, under its remit of envisioning and equipping congregations for providing effective pastoral care, the Council will need to prioritise which of these require most immediate attention, also remaining aware that some of these issues are presently being explored in other areas of the General Assembly’s work. (PCI Annual Report 2019, 228)

This evaluation of the annual reports of the General Assembly from 2005-19 brought to light the somewhat changing pastoral priorities of the church. This short synopsis has indicated that the earlier booklet of 1999, *Coping with Childlessness* revealed a concern creating the momentum of a proposed ‘listening service’. In the subsequent years until 2006-7, reference was made to the listening service. However, the listening service or childlessness never appeared again in any of the reports as a pastoral concern or as a separate category as a ‘presenting problem’ in counselling.

While the issue of childlessness waned as a matter of concern with the General Assembly’s business, the church was also bereft of resources pertaining to cognate concerns.

This was confirmed in the examination of existing materials. In a booklet produced as part of the “challenging issues” series entitled, *The Family*, and described as “one of a series of study guides to help Christians think through difficult issues in a helpful and informative way”, childlessness was never mentioned, and *Coping with Childlessness* was not even listed in its bibliography, nor were any of the twelve books listed in its bibliography directed towards issues of childlessness. It would have been reasonable, though perhaps debatable, to argue that by definition ‘families’ presumed the existence of children. However, if that had been a working assumption, other titles in the bibliography did not reflect this. These titles included *Briefing Paper on Marriage*, *Sixty Minute Marriage*, *The Marriage Book*, *Homosexuality* and, finally, *Exploring Marriage*. While some of these books might have made reference to childlessness, it seemed strange that the only resource written by PCI *Coping with Childlessness*, was not referred to.

However, the PDF leaflet entitled *Contraception* acknowledged under Point 2 on Global Issues that, “the falling fertility rate in developed countries has become an issue in recent years” (PCI 2012). As a basic balancing principle, the booklet suggested:

The Biblical injunction to reproduce at Gen 1:28 must be taken in context with the NT Principle that other concerns, particularly the demands to faithfulness to God’s call to service, can take precedence over both marriage and reproduction. 1Cor. 7 “This seems to suggest that we are not under a divine call to produce as great a quantity of offspring as possible, but to bear children who can be nurtured and given appropriate attention, instruction, love and material resources” (PCI 2012, 4).

In this document, the PCI implies that procreation is a fundamental requirement of marriage and support for marriage presuming children is clear from the attention it is given on their official website. As of June 2019, the online resources of the PCI were heavily weighted in favour of supporting family life. For example, in the Resources for Christian Families section, fifty-six books were listed to help with parenting issues. Yet, nowhere in the

resources section could a book or resource be found providing support for those struggling with infertility. What this might infer or imply to those contending with childlessness is there is a seeming distinction between marriage and family, with a family only being constituted or made complete when children are produced. It became apparent that the PCI had not considered infertility a contemporary problem that warranted inclusion. It seemed as if infertility had been relegated as an issue of concern and dropped as a priority since 2007, yet, even by the PCI's own admission, infertility has been the increasing experience of many throughout the developed world. However, there was evidence to suggest that it did not wane in importance due to competing demands but might have been consciously abandoned mid-way in the process.

It would appear as if other literature around the subject had been planned but abandoned.⁸ The cancelled publication was reported by one of the couples during the semi-structured interviews. This couple had taken part in a discussion group on the subject of involuntary childlessness. The proposed publication appeared to consist of a series of pamphlets similar in structure to the booklet *Coping with Childlessness*. Whilst the booklet *Coping with Childlessness* included the experiences of those contending with infertility and topics such as the male and female perspectives, the pain of childlessness, and coping with grief, it was particularly short of personal narratives. No attempt was made to personalise the experience. For example, under the heading "A Female Perspective" it states, "Many women identify with the role of mother from a very early stage. To realise that this role will never be

⁸ Whilst the research will seek to establish possible reasons as to why the proposed publication was abandoned, it can only do so in the absence of any official reason being stated. Nevertheless, the outcome of such proposed publications not going to print will be discussed in chapter four.

a reality is probably one of the most difficult and painful situations any woman will have to face” (PCI 1999, 5).

However, in the new pamphlets that were ready for print in 2006 but never published, a clear acknowledgment and attempt to recognise personal narrative had emerged. The accounts of those stories illustrated the desire to move from information to lived experience. The account of the male was still in the third person but did reveal a particular male undergoing a difficult experience as can be seen by what follows. The pamphlet was entitled ‘Childlessness – Putting all the Pieces Together’:

Fred [not his real name] was the youngest of a family of five. When he got married everyone advised him and his wife to wait a couple of years to get used to married life, and enjoy being on their own, before starting a family. All good advice in itself and, having waited for what seemed a sensible time, the married couple began to try for a family of their own, others having married and started families. However, there was disappointment. What followed were visits for both husband and wife for investigations by GPs before a referral to the RVH for further investigations. The night before the results, taking his wife in his arms he assured her of his love no matter the outcome (thinking in his heart he had nothing to worry about).

When they were given the news that they may never have children of their own, there followed the painful experience of telling those who knew it and avoiding the subject with the rest. Church was not easy, particularly when they were asked to share the joy of the others who presented their children for baptism. But God, who is infinitely more patient with us than we are with each other or ourselves, has brought this couple in his time to a place of acceptance. (PCI 2006, 1)

The narrative introduces the reader to what for many couples appear normative expectation, the hope that someday they will be blessed with children. Soon we sense his shock, disappointment and almost disbelief that they were diagnosed as infertile. While he was appreciative of the support of those closest to them, he also attempted to avoid others, which appeared to be the antipathy of fellowship. Finally, baptism, a place of apparent celebration for many, becomes the occasion of sadness for others. The same pamphlet then moved to the first-person account of a female contributor. Beth (not her real name) wrote:

Not for me the happy, early years [of a child], the joy of the first, faltering steps and the first words. Not for me the stresses of examination result, the hopes of university and a promising career. Not for me the tearful emotion of family engagement and wedding days. Not for me the grandchildren who could ease my later years. I had dark depression, days of wondering ‘What if?’ ‘If only’. Sundays when my heart was torn asunder as parents presented their children for baptism, I have to climb out of the abyss time and time again. (PCI 2006, 1)

These personal narratives were the lived experiences of members of the PCI and the pamphlet gave at least some recognition to those feeling the pain and isolation of involuntary childlessness. In response to these personal insights, the same leaflet did what *Coping with Childlessness* failed to do – it offered ministers, in particular, advice as to how to respond to the situation by stating that “If you are involved in planning services, we would ask that you consider the following” (PCI 2006, 3), and these were the recommendations given:

Family Services are often considered to be relevant only to those who are two children, family. Single people and childless couples sometimes stay away to avoid embarrassment or distress. Perhaps, you could adopt the name some Churches use of “All age worship” or “Church Family Services.”

Mother’s/Father’s Day/Baptisms These can be particularly difficult services for people without children as they can be left feeling isolated and the odd one out. Some people may even avoid these services altogether as each time a parent brings their child for baptism it reminds them of their childlessness. We would ask you to tune into the occasion of the day, joy for one, perhaps pain for the others. Help members to share in the joy and the role that the whole church plays in influencing this child for the kingdom.

Marriage Ceremony: Whilst the declaration of marriage cannot change, care can be taken in the phraseology and language used in the prayers when recent research shows that a huge percentage of couples who marry will experience difficulty conceiving. Ministers should not assume that couples can have children when preparing their prayer at the close of the service.

Prayer Topics: The following may be useful prayer topics to consider in services where appropriate:

(a) Ask God to speak clearly and with comfort to couples who are faced with childlessness and who long for a child of their own. That He would reveal His total trustworthiness and compassion towards them, and for the couples to be able to trust that He has a plan for them. Remember couples who are trying to come to terms with childlessness, praying that their marriages will be protected.

(b) Pray that the inevitable stress and unhappiness may not erode their love for one another.

(c) Pray that couples trying to adopt children or become foster caregivers would be successful in their efforts to provide a family in this way.

(d) Pray for those with medical problems and for those awaiting results from tests.

The name of this unpublished pamphlet was *Putting all the Pieces Together*.

However, it was very unfortunate that it never reached publication as it offered, albeit in a limited manner, the articulation of the lived experiences of the church's own members. The fact that it was abandoned, perhaps unintentionally, gave the impression that childlessness was no longer being prioritised, even though there was an acknowledgement of the deep hurt of those who experienced it. The pamphlet entitled *Infertility* in the same series was resolute in its summation:

Infertility can be emotionally painful and for some couples a truly devastating experience. Only once they have committed themselves to becoming parents do they discover they are infertile.

The pain is part of the lives of many couples. As Christians, we must be aware how painful events such as Children's Day, Mother's/Father's Day, Christmas events and Baptism can be for infertile couples. (PCI Infertility 226, 1)

Again, in the same series of four unpublished pamphlets, dealing this time with a biblical perspective on childlessness, the contributor stipulated:

Childbearing is, and always has been, a central priority in every culture and civilisation. The pain of childlessness is, therefore, all the greater, because it is often a secret, silent pain, too deep to be shared even with close family. This leaflet is written by people who have themselves experienced the pain and, for some, the devastation of childlessness, for couples struggling to come to terms with such a situation but also for family and friends who need to be sensitive to the feelings of childless couples. The pain is possibly even greater for Christian couples who know that "children are a blessing from the Lord (Psalm 127:3) and one of the intended outcomes of Christian Marriage. (Genesis 1:28) (PCI A Biblical Perspective on Childlessness 2006, 1)

These unpublished documents marked a substantial move in the right direction. Not only did they build on the good work provided by the *Coping with Childlessness* booklet, but also created a platform where personal narrative, ecclesiastical practice and pastoral responsibility were clearly acknowledged. If the national statistics are even partially representative of the number facing childlessness after the period 2006-2007, then the PCI has a much bigger problem than they are currently willing to recognise.

Motivated by this concern I wrote in 2016 an article for the *Presbyterian Herald*, the PCI's national magazine. It was titled "The Experience of Involuntary Childlessness in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland." In it, the research being undertaken at the University of Glasgow into the subject of infertility was explained. After that, and a subsequent interview on *Sunday Sequence*, sixteen emails were received from couples expressing their experience of isolation. In each case, they attributed these feelings of marginalisation directly to remaining childless. A surprising response came from one correspondent who suggested that the researcher might not be best placed to carry out the research because of his belief in covenant theology.

It was not very clear how representative this perception was, but it did underline the fact that at least one woman found the PCI's portrayal of covenant theology problematic. Her email correspondence and expressed concern is included in the Chapter Five for consideration.

2.5.6 PCI's Response to Infertility

As previously stated, the denomination produced one document in response to the issue of infertility. Another publication an "in house" bio-ethical pamphlet produced in 1995 helped inform the publication of *Coping with Childlessness*. *Coping with Childlessness*

contained four chapters with the first outlining the experience of childlessness, the second summarising biblical material on barrenness and possible opportunities for spiritual fruitfulness; the third explored IVF and associated ethical issues, and the final chapter considered adoption and fostering.

In fact, Chapter Three of this pamphlet is extensively given over to the ethical consideration of new reproductive technologies, namely, Artificial Insemination by Husband (AIH), In vitro Fertilisation (IVF), Donor Insemination (DI), Surrogacy, Gamete Intra – Fallopian Transfer (GIFT), Peritoneal Oocyte and Sperm Transfer (POST), and Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI). After a brief introduction to each, the booklet, *Coping with Childlessness*, offers working principles which should govern the choice made by parishioners. Firstly, “human life is sacred and begins at conception – Psalm 139 provides evidence to support this position. Genesis 1 v 26; 9 v 6 are also relevant here. Secondly, procreation is intended to be within a marriage relationship, Genesis chapters 1 and 2 provide a basis for an understanding of the purposes of marriage, one of which is procreation” (2005, 13). PCI’s ethical considerations suggested that AIH does not contravene the working principles. For IVF, if no third party is involved, there is no contravention of the working principles. However, DI, contravenes the second working principle. Surrogacy was generally believed to contravene the working principles. GIFT, POST and ICIS, provided no third party was involved, all appeared to be acceptable, based on the same pre-conditions.

Yet, the Church’s conclusion is rather interesting, given the supposed clear instructions regarding which treatments were acceptable according to the working principles. It states that:

The topic of infertility treatment is a controversial one. This chapter is an attempt to guide Christian couples through the ethical maze and show that some treatments may be acceptable in the light of biblical principles. That is not to

say that these treatments will be acceptable to all. The ethical dimensions of infertility treatment are a highly complex and difficult area, encompassing physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects. Furthermore, there are other sincerely held Christian viewpoints. In reaching a conclusion on the way ahead, a couple will have to jointly, and prayerfully, consider their course of action, which may include one or more treatments, or none at all. (2005, 15)

As the researcher, I will make four observations at this point. Firstly, the concluding line suggesting that possibly one, or more, or no treatments may have to be prayerfully decided upon may only leave the parishioners as undecided as they were prior to reading the chapter. Secondly, the personal nature of the decision coupled with the fear of restrictions being imposed by the church may impede pastoral discussion from occurring. For example, I only learned from one of my own parishioners, after the couple had made six trips to San Francisco, that they had been offered private treatment for assisted reproduction.

Thirdly, in some cases, for the infertile woman, it may not always be a question of ‘becoming a mother’ but rather of ‘bearing children’. When considering ‘motherhood’ and issues relating to adoption, it would be helpful if the church understood that these may indeed be two separate issues. As a result, it is important to consider IVF and/or adoption in equal measure as such may fulfil (or leave unfulfilled) two very different expectations, depending on the primary desire of the woman.

Fourthly, it is interesting that in the same booklet, the chapter on IVF was chronologically placed before that of adoption and fostering. This might not have been a strategic consideration, but this sequence could indicate some underlying assumptions that would need further exploration. For example, is it the PCI’s assumption that the ‘natural’ response of a couple, once they are diagnosed as infertile, should be to consider assisted reproduction before adoption? Or is the PCI simply being pragmatic and following the sequence required by adoption agencies that if adoption is being considered, any possible

journey involving assisted reproduction has been fully explored by the couple prior to engaging in the adoption process? Have they assumed that the biological drive would be so strong that it expects that this should be the ‘natural’ route to follow? These are questions that any further research must consider.

Whilst *Coping with Childlessness* may have been restricted by the limitations of space and the diversity of the reading audience, a more detailed narrative of the lived experience of parishioners was required. A person may feel isolated by their experiences, but it is also necessary to understand how and why. Secondly, in a denomination that holds to the centrality of God’s Word, it was surprising that in *Coping with Childlessness* so little attention was given to specific biblical references and general principles. While this omission should not be overstated given the limitations of the space, nevertheless, if the belief of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland remains that the Word of God shapes their response to life, then dealing more specifically and systematically with biblical, systematic, and practical theology needs to be more developed.

The role of the General Assembly in the PCI is central to its policymaking, but it also reflects the theological concerns and issues deemed important to church life. Doctrinal integrity, pastoral provision, and mission engagement are common themes reported on by the church. This thesis will, therefore, seek to determine if significant attention, theological consideration, and adequate provision has been offered by the PCI to those most affected by infertility. The General Assembly may hope that its own theological discourse will help shape the opinions and response of its members, but the PCI is also aware that the parishioners are subjected to cultural values and norms as well as their influences. The recent discussion within the Church of Scotland regarding same-sex relationships has raised concern

within the PCI. A doctrine committee's report of the PCI gave consideration to a Church of Scotland's (CoS) report delivered to the Scottish Assembly, which concluded that:

The final argument of the report (of the Church of Scotland) is the most problematic. The authors argue (2.4.2-2.4.15) that Christ's coming inaugurates a new age in which the Second Adam inaugurates his Kingdom and brings all things under his rule, and "does not do so by procreation" (2.4.7). Several responses are in order. First, the Committee believes this is a clear example of an over-realized eschatological perspective. Of course, the gospel proclaims that we will one day be like the angels in heaven (Matt. 22:30), but it is an over-realized eschatology to claim angelic experience now. (PCI Annual Reports 2018, 83)

Unfortunately, the doctrine committee of the PCI has failed to establish why it is clear that the CoS position is an over-realized eschatology. However, most importantly, and for purposes of this study, it affirms the historic tradition of the church in defining marriage with regards to faithfulness, persistence, and procreation. As PCI continues to adopt this position, it does so as the number of those adversely affected by infertility in Northern Ireland continues to increase. While global trends establish the extent of the problem, lived experience reveals the very personal nature of those feeling challenged by infertility. Those living within the UK may understandably query the cross-cultural relevance of the aforementioned studies. However, within the PCI, a prevailing desire for patriarchal hierarchy remains, and however moderated from the cross-cultural comparisons, persists to this day. The *Belfast Telegraph* reported the most recent example of this in July 2018. In response to the General Assembly's decision (2018) to prevent same-sex couples becoming full members of the church, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that:

Speaking on Radio Ulster's Talkback programme, Rev. Neilly was asked by host William Crawley if the vote was part of a shift in the church to a more conservative position, and if repealing the right of women to become ministers - something which has been in place since the 1970s - was something which was being considered.

“Well, from my perspective I would be delighted in many respects if we went down that route,” said Rev. Neilly.

“But to be honest with you I don’t see that to be on the cards. I feel there are other issues which are probably more important for us to deal with and to be standing firm on.”

Asked his reason for his position on female ordination, Rev. Neilly said repealing the ordination of women would be “bringing us back to the word of God and his teaching.” Rev Neilly said his position was based on maintaining proximity to the biblical teachings. “I am aware that there are those who find it difficult. However, at the same time I feel we have a responsibility to do two things. Certainly, to show the love of the Lord Jesus Christ to all, and at the same time to stand for biblical truth,” he said. (Belfast Telegraph Digital, 2018).

The extreme patriarchal hierarchy might be lacking, but it would seem to be still embedded in the minds of some of the PCI ministers.⁹ For example, in my current pastoral congregation there are a total of 35 active elders, none of whom are women and currently the only people who are asked to collect the offering during the worship service are elders, women are therefore excluded from such primary acts of service and worship. This would seem to reflect the patriarchal practices normally associated with fundamentally conservative congregations in the west or structures more prevalent within non-western communities.

2.6 Summary

The literature review highlighted many interesting factors regarding infertility and its impact on women, in the church and otherwise, and on their families and society. It demonstrated that in some societies, women bore the brunt of the situation compounded by patriarchy, which view women mainly as child bearers. Surprisingly, Western churches seem at times to not only reflect and reinforce the patriarchal position when it came to infertile

⁹ Nor should it be automatically assumed that within PCI or the broader church that some forms of patriarchy are not welcomed by its female members, regardless of one’s perception as the appropriateness of such a perception.

women but also demonstrate variations. Whilst multiple aspects associated with the impact of childlessness have been reviewed, the themes of alienation and isolation seemed to be recurring throughout. Such areas should be considered pertinent when examining the experience of involuntary childlessness within the Presbyterian Church of Ireland.

A consideration of *alienation* and *isolation*, is deemed necessary as social cohesion and integration are fundamental to Christian fellowship and so any adverse effect marginalisation might have on parishioners is a serious concern. As individuals interact with the material effects of detachment, they may also begin to ‘feel’ the personal impact of unfulfilled expectations and desires. Therefore, the psychological impact of childlessness on those seeking to conceive should be further explored. The concept of ‘ecclesiastical tension’ examines the possible conflict experienced by childless couples/individuals as they express personal faith within church community.

In Chapter Four, such themes will be discussed in detail, along with other emerging themes that will reveal the full extent of the marginalisation experienced by respondents. Yet, it was against the backdrop of alienation and isolation that a rethink of covenant communities occurred. A rethink, that not only encourages us to review our baptismal liturgy and practices, but also what it means to be a truly inclusive Christian family.

Although involuntary childlessness has attracted significant research attention, it is also apparent that there are additional gaps in the literature that will require further research. They are as follows:

1. Within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, there has been a very limited response to those experiencing infertility. A small booklet has been the only response over a twenty-four-year period, and a more comprehensive response is required. In 2006, an attempt by PCI to publish a document relating to childlessness failed to reach publication which, along with the subsequent absence of material, underscores both a lack of provision and a failure to

prioritise the issue. My research is intended to provide recognition of the need to reconsider this matter in relation to these priorities. The published booklet and the draft copy of the unpublished pamphlets of 2006 highlighted the 'isolation' felt by those who were childless, but did not illustrate what type of marginalisation, if any, had occurred as a result of this. To establish the validity of this claim will require an in-depth qualitative study before we can ascertain the actual impact that involuntary childlessness has on the PCI parishioners and hence the need for this study.

2. The literature review highlights the suffering of women in particular, however, research into the experiences of men is still underdeveloped and the socio-cultural discourse surrounding infertility has, in the main, historically centered on women (Marsiglio et al., 2013). Inhorn argues that men often become the 'second sex' in reproductive scholarship and this is largely based on untested assumptions of insignificant interest in reproductive intentions and outcomes (2012, 6). In my research, I will be seeking to include the perspective of men within the PCI.
3. While the advantages of interdisciplinary studies are welcomed, it appears that while some do not hesitate to integrate theology with science, the same cannot be said of the intra-disciplinary approach within the broad field of theology itself, as such, there appears to be less emphasis on attempting to integrate the fields of systematic, biblical, and practical theology than would be useful. Cox calls for us, "to develop a theology of infertility that helps women and men not feel like failures, that counters the sense that they have somehow found disfavour with God or that they are incomplete members of the body of Christ" (2013, 45). In 1979, a working party set up under the auspices of the Free Church Federal Council and The British Council of Churches, had succinctly, but not exhaustively, attempted to integrate these various theological disciplines. As a result, it has laid an important foundation for further consideration when it raises the following concern that I believe will need further investigation. The working party stated that "When we think of childlessness, we may reduce it to the level of a practical problem which must be solved by practical intervention. What needs prior consideration, however, is our whole attitude as members of a community to procreation and parenting, and how parents, non-parents and children can contribute to one another in finding their essential humanity" (Free Church Federal Council 1982).

Therefore, if the PCI is to aid those challenged by infertility, it will be required to consider its attitude towards procreation. Does PCI's theological view and presentation overstate the importance of biological parenthood, and by doing so, understate the value of a broader understanding of covenant community? Does the PCI presume that the objective of

every marriage is to produce children? It could be argued that this is at least inferred in the PCI Book of Public Worship when it writes:

It (marriage) was ordained for the continuance of the holy ordinance of family life, that children, who are the heritage of the Lord, should be duly nurtured and trained up in godliness. (Book of Public Worship 1965, 190)

Would the PCI be willing to revise their liturgy in response to the voices of those contending with childlessness? Only time will tell. Nevertheless, the 2018 PCI doctrine report did recognise the integrity of marriage where the possibility of procreation may be absent:

The (Church of Scotland's) suggested new paradigm, replacing heterosexual v homosexual with procreative v non-procreative, defines marriage far too narrowly in reproductive terms. The biblical-theological warrant for this move is not presented and the theological tradition of the church has long included within the goods of marriage aspects of human flourishing distinguishable from reproduction yet exclusive to marriage. (2018, 83)

How far the PCI would contemplate exploring 'essential humanity' or recognising 'aspects of human flourishing distinguishable from reproduction' as normal to marriage, is questionable. Nevertheless, moving towards human flourishing apart from procreation or as a necessary requirement of the 'goods of marriage' may be needed and it could be argued that this would more adequately reflect the eschatological covenant community alluded to in the scriptures. This would recognise that the challenge of involuntary childlessness is not just a practical problem, but also a deeply ingrained biblical and theological challenge to self-perception and how we understand God's command to go forth and multiply. It will be interesting to see how far the PCI may move in this direction.

4. Providing helpful research to the PCI cannot be limited to parishioners. If this research is calling for transformative praxis, then the attitudes, perspectives, and practices of ministers will firstly need collated during research before it can be effectively revised. The necessity of ascertaining clerical opinion, even in a

very selective way, is critical to promoting a better understanding of those experiencing infertility, as the role of ministers within PCI is two-fold. At the parish level, they deal publicly with biblical exposition and pastoral care, and secondly, clergy at the General Assembly reflect on theological priorities and engage in policymaking. Therefore, the need for research that stimulates a 're-think' among the clergy cannot be understated.

This study combines an ethnographic approach with theological reflections and in the process, it has revealed many gaps in the literature and the Church's lack of an adequate response to the problem of infertility among its members. This means the Church cannot retreat to the safety of silence and it is hoped that this study will become a stimulus for this needed work to be carried out.

Chapter 3: The Research Design

3.1 Introduction

From my observation and experience, it seemed that there was hardly a clear statement by the PCI as to the deep pastoral needs or theological complexity surrounding the experience of involuntary childlessness. Given the pain and disconnectedness this issue was known to be causing for some of the congregants, it was felt that the topic needed to be moved from anecdotal reports to formal investigation. Therefore, the study set out to explore the lived experiences of the PCI parishioners contending with involuntary childlessness; to determine, more specifically, the extent to which this hurt, and disconnectedness exist and to identify some of the associated contributory factors; and to evaluate the perceptions of both clergy and laity with reference to baptism and how this impacts congregational life for those contending with infertility. The additional two objectives were to assess the level of priority given and pastoral care provided to PCI parishioners experiencing infertility and how those persons perceived such practices; and, based on the findings, to consider a theological proposal that would enable further discussion and good practice.

In order to achieve these objectives, a qualitative study was undertaken employing three methods of data collection with the first being a short survey of the clergy to ascertain their opinion and practice regarding involuntary childlessness. The second was a number of in-depth semi-structured interviews to provide a rich and thick description of the human experience relating to involuntary childlessness. The third took the form of a documentary analysis of the existing PCI literature undertaken in Chapter Two, in order to provide a context for the study.

The methodological framework within which the study was conducted will first be discussed followed by the details of the methodology chosen for studying the subject. While the terms used to describe the various frameworks and the boundaries that separate them are not easily identifiable, the four main ones for consideration are positivism, interpretivism, constructivism, and critical realism, with the last considered as the most appropriate for the study. However, to put all these theories in context, the process of knowing will first be examined.

3.2 The Process of Knowing

How we define, understand, and seek to communicate what we know is a complex interaction of culture, personal experience, ideology, and conscious and sub-conscious impulses. To be aware of my positioning as I interpret the research data is critical to the credibility of this study. Therefore, ‘the whole system of principles, theories and values that underpins a particular approach to research’, must be recognised in the methodology (Somekh and Lewin, 2005). However, before even beginning to look at the four particular research paradigms, it is necessary to give some consideration to ontology and epistemology. Ontology has been described as the nature of ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’ (Guba 1990), a philosophical enquiry into the assumptions about what is real, that is, the essence or nature of the social phenomenon we may be investigating (Scotland, 2012). Whereas epistemology concerns the very basis of knowledge as is explained by Zalta et al:

Defined narrowly, epistemology is the study of knowledge and justified belief. As the study of knowledge, epistemology is concerned with the following questions: What are the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge? What are its sources? What is its structure, and what are its limits? As the study of justified belief, epistemology aims to answer questions, such as: how are we to understand the concept of justification? What makes justified beliefs justified? Is justification internal or external to one's own mind? Understood more broadly, epistemology is about issues having to do with the creation and

dissemination of knowledge in particular areas of inquiry. (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2005, 1)

There is also a relationship between what is knowable and the person seeking out that knowledge as Dieronitou maintains, “it is worth noting that the term epistemology is derived from the ancient Greek verb ‘epistame’ which means to know something very well; to have internalized something by experiencing it - denoting a close relationship of the knower and the known” (Dieronitou 2014, 5).

Carter and Little maintain that sufficient attention needs to be given to the researcher’s philosophical and ontological position for three reasons. Firstly, it influences the relationship between the researcher and the participants based on whether they are the contributors or subjects when they carry out their research. Secondly, it impacts the choice of method and how the data are subjected to the rigors of analysis. Thirdly, it will have an influence on the researcher’s conceptualisation of the data and findings and how these are communicated to the audience (Carter & Little 2007). According to Gee, it would be unacceptable to deploy a research method that seeks to describe the world as if it were free from an underpinning theory (Gee, 2004). Therefore, in conducting and presenting the research, it is essential to outline which set or combinations of assumptions I have embraced to erect a defensible construction of the social phenomenon under consideration (Blaikie 2007). As I seek to investigate and interpret the social world of those experiencing involuntary childlessness, Carter and Little are right to maintain that I will do so, “at least (with) tacit assumptions about what knowledge is and how it is constructed (Carter & Little, 2007, 1319). Recognising epistemology and ontology is critical, as both exist prior to the formulation of the research questions and their subsequent validation and dissemination. It, therefore, goes without saying that research is not possible without a research paradigm.

3.3 The Research Paradigm

The use of paradigm as a philosophical way of thinking was introduced by the American philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1962). However, defining paradigm and applying it can often be problematic, as according to Kivunja and Kuyini who state that “The concept of research paradigm is one that many higher degree research students, and even early career researchers, find elusive to articulate and challenging to apply in their research proposals” (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, 26). Nevertheless, the importance of a worldview should not be understated, as DeWitt contends:

[It is] a system of beliefs that are interconnected in something like the way the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle are interconnected. That is, a worldview is not merely a collection of separate, independent, unrelated beliefs, but it is instead an intertwined, interrelated, interconnected system of beliefs. (2010, 7) Within academia, competing paradigms have emerged, such as positivism, interpretivism and constructivism. Positivism and constructivism are at the opposite ends of the continuum, but an ever-increasing number of paradigms position themselves somewhere along that continuum. These include positivism, post positivism, feminist theory, action research, queer theory, and post positivism, among others. However, I wish to outline four general types that still may be nuanced by various researchers. Each theory reveals an epistemology that seeks to determine what is knowable, how it can be known and how universally, if at all, is the application of such knowledge. From this discussion, I will then argue for my choice of critical realism as the most appropriate paradigm to use for my research.

3.3.1 Positivism

This theory proposes that within the natural world, scientific laws take the form of ‘general or covering laws’ which, once discovered, are both universal and exceptionalness and open to falsification (Gorski 2004). As Blaikie explains, it is “generalising from observed regularities between events” (Blaikie 2007, 20) where there is no ontological distinction between the natural and social entities; both are just objects of experience. Foundationalism is also an expression of this type of epistemological certainty. It too is grounded in the assertion that belief is open to justification by appealing to observable data that are self-evident or indubitable. According to Huyssteen, a certain level of inflexibility and infallibility can be achieved because in the process of justifying our knowledge claims, “we are able to invoke ultimate foundations on which we construct the evidential support systems of our various convictional beliefs” (Huyssteen 1997, 3). However, Macallan states that foundationalism goes even further than this by claiming that:

[It] hopes to ground our knowing on a basis that can provide us with certainty and deliver us from error. This basis is regarded as universal and context free and is available to any rational person. This approach can either be deductive or inductive, from innate ideas of sensory world...and spawns a realistic metaphysic that has a strong preference for the correspondence theory of truth.” (Macallan 2014, 21, 24)

The importance of being able to predict and control social reality was perceived as a benefit of positivism as Porpora asserts, “. . . prediction and control were in turn important because the ultimate point was to fix society for the better. Hence...scientific optimism” (Porpora 2015, 9). Other distinct advantages include replication as data are collated and analysed. Once statistical significance has been reached, for example, in the use of a questionnaire, then future quantitative predictions can be made (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). It has been suggested that by using Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient, once

internal consistency or correlation between the variables has been established, the reliability of the findings can be confirmed (Dörnyei, 2007). Accordingly, with appropriate sampling and statistical evaluation of the data, one can be assured that the intensity of the research produced by experimental, or survey research will be of benefit to the research questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017).

However, a few limitations to this research paradigm have been proffered. It has been rightly queried as to how effectively the positive paradigm (using quantitative methods) can measure social reality, particularly when it relates to the presentation of intent, attitude, feelings, or thoughts (Hammersley, 2013). Such constraints have led Swinton and Mowat to conclude that the nomothetic knowledge required in positivism, such as falsification, replication, and generalisation, cannot be applied to social phenomena. In contrast, ideographic knowledge, “presumes meaning and knowledge can be discovered in unique, non-replicable experiences” (2006, 43). Ideographic knowledge presented through narratives and storytelling is particularly relevant in the Bible. As such, theological truths are not open to investigation using the same criteria as those for the natural world. The observation that no two experiences are the same does appear to limit the potential of the positive paradigm for collecting, analysing, and interpreting the data, particularly when falsification, replication and generalisation are the necessary requirements for this paradigm.

Pham is also concerned that since the objective of this kind of research is to lead to generalisation, the individual’s personal contribution could be inadvertently devalued. Furthermore, she raised the issue of the accuracy of the respondents’ contribution to the research and concludes that:

The accuracy of the scientific data collected within this paradigm should be carefully reviewed as, in some situations, the respondents may choose random

answers rather than authentic responses or they are not allowed to have the flexibility to give their answers which are more relevant to their personal cases. (Pham 2018, 3)

3.3.2 Interpretivism

Whilst laws govern the natural world, social reality exists only because we attribute ‘meaning’ to it. Thus, any attempt at seeking to understand social and natural entities will have different objectives and will therefore require the use of different methods to understand their respective realities. By avoiding general laws, interpretivism does not seek to explain what happens in the social world, but rather to render it comprehensible by reconstructing meaning and intention (Gorski 2013). As Porpora explains:

Whilst interpretivists also accept the concept of causality entailed by the covering law model, they accept that causality involves universal laws and that such laws imply determinism – i.e., necessary connections among events. Interpretivists simply deny that causality reigns in the human sphere. Rather, for the interpretivists, the covering law model of explanation is confined to the natural sphere.... whereas, the natural order is governed by the principle of causality and causal relations, the human order is governed by reason. Thus, whereas the natural order is a domain of determinism, the human order is a domain of freedom. Thus, as well, whereas the natural order can be studied objectively from the outside, the human order must be studied subjectively from within. (Porpora 2015, 39)

Therefore, within this model of thinking, a separation exists between how we know and what we can know in the natural world as opposed to its social counterpart, even as Porpora stated:

Humans, in other words, distinctly have thoughts and feelings about things, quite apart from the qualities of the things themselves. The things themselves – like unicorns and witches – may not even exist. As interpretivists observed, this distinct human dimension of aboutness has no counterpart in the physical domain of the natural sciences and cannot be ignored. (Porpora 2015, 40)

Interpretivism provides a basis for observing the social world unconstrained by the positivist insistence upon falsification, replication, and generalisation. It facilitates research

by moving beyond description to attempting to understand social phenomenon within its very own social context. The vantage point of the subject as object is not neglected. Meaning-making is not prescribed externally but arises from the unique experiences of the individual who is the object of study. This method employs several appropriate methodologies including grounded theory, ethnography, case study and life history, all of which capture the insider's insights into the object of study (Tuli, 2010). Interpretivism "allows [the] researcher to investigate and prompt things that we cannot observe; researchers can probe an interviewee's thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives" (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007). This will be a particularly significant factor for consideration in deciding which methodology is most appropriate to accomplish the objectives of my research question.

3.3.3 Constructivism

The strength of the case for the constructivist also rests on some of the ideas coming from the interpretivist school, which says that social life is linguistically constructed, but the natural sciences are also to be understood as governed by impersonal discourse and powers. In its most extreme forms of constructivism, it says there is nothing beyond the text, that all perceived reality is but a dance of signs (Reason & Bradbury 2005). The choreography is a human construct regardless of which sign it relates to and as Gorski maintains, "On this view, there is no real difference between say, sociological and literary theory, or in some extreme formulations, between quantum physics and Azande magic. In other words, social constructionists embrace a very strong form of epistemic relativism...and that there is no 'real' or 'neutral' basis for adjudication between them" (Gorski 2013, 2). Some constructionists reject the ideal of a single reality and proposes that multiple interpretations of reality legitimately co-exist (Morcol 2001), thereby, holding to an ontology of multiple

realities, it maintains that there can be no one possible correct reality. Thus, the meaning or reconstruction of those multiple realities exists, not independently, but through human interaction between the researcher and subject (Chalmers, Manley & Wasserman, 2009).

As such, constructivist epistemology takes on a subject-subject posture with facts and values that become inextricably linked so research becomes value bound, as the knower and the known become inseparable (Dieronitou 2014). With a subjectivist epistemology, meaning-making by the researcher is produced by their own thinking and cognitive processing of the data informed by human interaction with the participants. As the researcher investigates real life situations within their natural settings, the outcome will be socially constructed knowledge (Punch 2005). The researcher becomes a participant observer using a variety of data gathering methods, including interviews, texts, discourses, and reflective sessions (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Like its interpretivist cousin, constructivism avoids the positivist's tools of validation and prefers credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to evaluate the knowledge gained.

These various tools are used to establish just how trustworthy, believable, or authentic the analysis of the data has been (Guba 1981). At first glance, interpretive/constructive dependability may be confused with the reliability of positivism. However, in the positivist paradigm, reliability is established by uniform replication and once it can be demonstrated that the findings of the data would not alter given the same context, methods, and participants. Then we can presume that the research is reliable. In constructivism, this is not possible. The objectification of results cannot be made because human behaviour is continuously variable, contextual, and open to multiple social realities. Instead, the researcher can draw inferences based on constructed meanings which are dependable in so much as the researchers sufficiently demonstrate by their skill that social knowledge has truly emerged

from an analysis of the data (Guba 1981). Conformability is possible when other researchers in the field can concur with the data analysed. The idea is to minimise, if not eliminate, any bias inappropriately obscuring the meaning-making of participants. As Shenton explains, “steps must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work’s findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (2004, 72). The final stage, known as transferability, proposed by Lincoln and Guba, maintains that the results from data analysis are transferable, in so much as enough contextual data have been appropriately analysed to be useful in another research context (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Yet, according to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) controversy still ensues as to what and how such transferability or generalisations are made:

Erlandson et al . . . (1993), like Gomm, Hammersley and Foster (2000) argue that since by definition, interpretivist research is context-specific, with regard to locale and participants, generalizability of the findings of research conducted within the Interpretivist paradigm is practically impossible. (2017, 34)

Whilst Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) make such observations, it is also true that Gomm, Hammersley and Foster do not deny the theoretical possibility of making case study generalisations, in so much that,

We have argued that. . .generalization is not an issue that can be regarded as irrelevant by case study researchers. It can be of significance for their work in two respects, first of all, it is one means they may seek to argue for the general relevance of the findings they have produced. Second, much case study research involves generalization within the case/s investigated (2000, 111). What Gomm, Hammersley and foster appear to be suspicious about, is that most case study researchers do not meet “necessary methodological requirements. (2000, 111)

In summarising the constructionist position as a theoretical model, it has correctly identified the influence social environment has upon our ideas and beliefs and, consequently, the meaning-making process. However, those constructionists seeking to dismiss the

possibility of any independent reality outside of what is socially constructed also has its critics. The suggestion that the natural and social world have no objectivity beyond the mental processes of interpretation has sparked much discussion and attracted criticism, and one such school of thought is critical realism.

3.3.4 Critical Realism

Critical realism (CR) has found significant expression in both the scientific and theological community and it appears to be a reaction against both positivism and constructivism. As Archer maintains:

Critical realism situates itself as an alternative paradigm both to scientific forms of positivism concerned with regularities, regression-based variables models, and the quest for law-like forms; and also, to the strong interpretivist or postmodern turn which denied explanation in favour of interpretation, with a focus on hermeneutics and description at the cost of causation. (Archer et al. 2016)

Where theorists position themselves on the objective/subjective continuum appears to vary, which may lead to frustration among those seeking an exact definition. It is this apparent ambiguity that has led some to contend that there is no exact critical realist stance, rather it becomes, ‘a label for their thoughts’ (Losch 2009, 86-87). According to Archer:

The reason for this is simple. Critical realism is not an empirical program; it is not a methodology; it is not even truly a theory, because it explains nothing. It is, rather, a meta-theoretical position: a reflexive philosophical stance concerned with providing a philosophically informed account of science and social science which can in turn inform our empirical investigations. (Archer et al. 2016)

Yet, from this school of thought, an alliance-of-ideas emerge categorised as ontological realism, epistemic relativism, and judgemental rationality forming what Archer calls a ‘metatheory’. In turn, each of these perspectives will inform our metaphysical thinking

on the nature of reality, how it can be known and if what is discovered can be universalised. The following three components generally typify CR.

3.3.5 Ontological Realism

Central to ontological realism is that belief that reality exists independent of our ability to perceive it; that it is not dependent on our existence or the product of what is socially constructed. Instead, “Critical realists are concerned with mapping the ontological character of social reality: those realities which produce the facts and events that we experience and empirically examine” (Archer et al. 2016). They further go on to add:

In saying this, critical realists do not reject either interpretivism or statistical modelling wholesale. Instead, combining explanation and interpretation, the aim is an historical inquiry into artefacts, culture, social structures, persons, and what affects human action and interaction. However, critical realists approach causation critically, using the partial regularities, facts, and events we encounter in the social world as a springboard or gateway to understand the complex, layered, and contingent processes or structures which cause those regularities, facts, and events. This must be done without reducing causation to constant conjunction forms in which event A is always followed by event B; but in order to do this, we require a thick and robust account of causation, structures, and processes which is able to do justice to the complexity and heterogeneity of the social world. In other words, we require a good account of the *nature* of the social world which does not naïvely import causal models from natural sciences. (Archer et al. 2016, 3)

Archer et al., add three other factors to the general properties of critical realism, these being, epistemic relativism, judgemental rationality, and cautious ethical naturalism. I will succinctly state the properties of epistemic relativism and judgemental rationality as it will have a direct bearing on the research question. Epistemic relativism maintains that knowledge is historically, socially, and culturally situated and influenced by context and concept, and that it is also activity dependent. This position helps maintain fallibility regarding our accounts of social reality, thus, our perspectives and representations have limitations. Archer

et al. believe that there is a certain ontological autonomy apart and distinct from our epistemologies and, it would seem, that their position is that they appear to be realists in terms of ontology and relativists regarding epistemology. Yet this relativism does not equate to all accounts of social reality being equally valid. In fact, we must adjudicate between competing views and rival accounts. According to Archer et al., “(it) is possible for social science to refine and improve its knowledge about the real world over time, and to make claims about reality which are relatively justified, while still being historical, contingent, and changing” (Archer et al., 2016, 4). The social sciences have contributed much to our understanding of social reality, yet this reflective philosophical stance or meta-theoretical position has influenced theology as well.

What CR is defending is a form of ontological realism that accepts the existence of a mind independent reality (Osmer 2008, McGrath 2006, Macallan 2014, Goard 2011, Wright 1992) and that God and knowledge about God can be accessed or apprehended. As such, it postulates that realism is possible, however, it dismisses a naïve realism that suggests that knowledge of reality is objectively determined. Rather, it states that our apprehension of reality, to a large extent, remains a human construct that is both fallible and provisional. It would be impossible to encompass every variation of CR, endorsed by theologians, so what is presented here is a summary of some of the commonalities found among them.

As Poythress asserts, “the ‘critical realist’, in distinction from the naïve realist, acknowledges that appearances can be deceptive, and that in practice, science is always tentative and subject to revision” (Poythress 2006, 197). This extends to theology as well and, according to Peacock, “theological concepts and models should be regarded as partial, inadequate and revisable, but necessary” (Peacock 1984, 6). Wright also describes CR as:

A way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence ‘realism’), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to reality lies along the spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence ‘critical’). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our inquiry into ‘reality’, so that our assertion about ‘reality’ acknowledges their own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning reality independent of the knower, is never self-independent of the knower. (Wright 1992, 35)

Whilst diversity of opinion exists, it seems that what unites all CR adherents is that they have a “fundamental commitment to metaphysical realism” (Goard 2011, 8). My own position concurs with the sentiments expressed by these authors that God is a mind independent reality that exists, apart, and detached from the process of human thinking. Therefore, I am affirming the possibility of ontological and epistemological realism. Nevertheless, I also recognise that my human situatedness will be impacted by the interpretive processes. This will have bearing on my engagement in interviews and the analysis of the data and scriptural texts. Therefore, I cannot avoid bringing my preunderstanding to bear on the social reality under investigation, and on the biblical texts that will be selected to shape, inform, and express my thinking. Yet, in terms of the conflation of the social reality and theological interpretation, I must be careful to treat, “both the world and our interpretation of the Christian tradition within a hermeneutic of suspicion” (Swinton & Mowat 2006, 76). However, within the CR model proposed by Swinton and Mowat, objectivity and subjectivity should not be viewed as diametric opposites on a continuum, but rather using the tool of reflexivity we can, albeit provisionally, reach objectivity whilst it is still being mediated through the world of human senses. The authors maintain this is best achieved whilst we remain critically self-aware and ‘bracketing’ the presuppositions of the researcher (Swinton and Mowat 2006).

As the PCI proports to hold a reformed position which is broadly evangelical, the centrality of Scripture is presumed. As this research is being carried out within that theological framework, it is appropriate to acknowledge that, and demonstrate how critical realism would be an acceptable methodological position to adopt. In the words of Gourd, “whilst there is no settled position on the details of evangelical theological method, some grand themes span the breadth of evangelical camps, perhaps the grandest theme is that evangelical theology must be biblical” (Goard 2011, 210). Two positions seem to emerge within evangelicalism regarding preunderstanding. At one end of the spectrum, Thomas argues that interpretative conclusions that appear tentative based on our preunderstanding introduce an unacceptable level of relativism/subjectivism. Therefore, he warns,

If allowed to progress to its logical end, however, this outlook may lead eventually to a realization that what we have considered to be cardinal dogmas - such as the deity of Christ, His second coming and his substitutionary atonement - are merely myopic conclusions of Western, white, middle-class males. Such a hermeneutical approach would spell the end of meaningful Christian doctrine. (Thomas 2002, 13)

Whilst Thomas raises some concerns, he is wrong to assume that those who accept and acknowledge the role that preunderstanding plays necessarily focus their attention on it at the expense of the text. It is possible to start our interpretation based on the text and simply ‘bracket’ our preunderstanding and, thereby, concur with Strickland’s observation that:

The key to maintaining objectivity in the interpretative process while also recognizing the validity of preunderstanding is to recognize that the preunderstanding of the interpreter is not to be regarded as final. It must remain open to revision and modification by the text in order to avoid eisegesis. The biblical text must be the final authority over preunderstanding. (Strickland 1987, 181)

The reader of the biblical text cannot start from any other position than their preunderstanding. However, in the examination of the text, the principles of textual

hermeneutics adopted by the researcher may also significantly moderate, modify, and revise our preunderstanding. This process could indeed end in the radical revision of former presumptions, as Jewett suggests, “no longer does the interpreter read Scripture for what she wants to find; rather, she listens to Scripture for what she was once afraid to hear” (Jewett 1991, 157).

I believe that CR is the most appropriate methodological stance for use in my study for the following reasons:

1. CR best describes my own reflective philosophical stance of believing that God is a mind independent reality. I believe, therefore, in the process of revelation that is also external and independent from what we construct as human beings.
2. CR more accurately represents my ontological assumptions, but it also provides the research with a more favourable reception within PCI, largely due to the rejection of alternative models that dismiss the possibility of any objective reality.
3. I also believe that apprehending truth claims about God and purporting to receive revelation from Him must be interpreted and therefore must also be provisional. I endorse Elias’ view of knowledge as being object-adequate. In this view, there remains a structured reality, one that is composed of the internal processes of meaning-making and thus ‘structured’, however, whilst our perceptions of reality may be structured, this does not negate the possibility of determining which construct more appropriately describes, therefore, it is up to the researcher to discover which explanation is object-adequate. Elias prefers to speak of advancements in knowledge as opposed to discovering absolute claims to truth as the final word (Elias 1971). This position effectively calls us to be critical of our epistemologies whilst also accepting a realistic ontology. However, I also maintain that holding an epistemology that is subject to criticism does not mean that the presentation of certain truth claims cannot be compelling or that by virtue of any truth claim being provisional, it must be devoid of being held with conviction.
4. PCI is indeed a confessional and largely conservative denomination and, as such, CR enables me to communicate my research findings without too much resistance both theologically and philosophically. Constructivism would be too controversial to our theological context and may divert attention away from the research question. It is vital that the focus of my study remains on the experience of those affected by involuntary childlessness and not the theoretical positioning of the researcher. To adopt CR not only represents my own theological

positioning, but also may provide for my research findings the widest possible audience in the PCI.

Critical Realism, as a meta-theoretical position or reflexive philosophical stance, lends itself quite appropriately to collecting data by the means of interviews, observation, and documentary analysis, nor by virtue of being an alliance-of-ideas is it adverse to the collecting of data through questionnaires. Nevertheless, it is the individual researcher who must decide just where they position themselves on the critical versus realist ends of the spectrum and, depending on where they are placed, will their preference for methods be revealed.

The experience of involuntary childlessness within the PCI is primarily a practical issue, however, it cannot be divorced from its social and ecclesiastical context. The latter is rooted within the Reformed evangelical context, which is already to admit a level of preunderstanding. Whilst I will engage biblical, systematic, and theological disciplines in seeking to understand and shape a response to infertility within the PCI, I can only do so after having *first* heard the ‘voice’ of those whom it primarily affects. The question is how this is best done as it will require the adoption of the most appropriate method/s.

3.4 The Research Methodology

Having decided to use the critical realism framework for the study, it seemed logical to choose a qualitative design for conducting the study in order to provide in-depth data from the participants’ own perspective as well as insights from the clergy regarding the issue of involuntary childlessness.

Qualitative research seeks to find its expression in words and not numbers, which is particularly suited to understanding concepts, thoughts, or experiences. As such, the

gathering of deep insights and perspectives on a topic, like involuntary childlessness, which is not always well understood within the church, is achieved best by this method. Therefore, it allows the researcher to focus on understanding context, complexity, and subjectivity, all of which are applicable within the PCI situation and where the objective is finding out the parishioners' personal experiences with regard to involuntary childlessness.

The benefits of using qualitative research methods for gathering data are well established and within practical theology have the potential to generate rich outcomes as Woodward and Pattison suggest, "practical theology is a place where religious belief, tradition and practice meet contemporary experiences, questions and actions and conduct a dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually and practically informing" (2000, 7). This dialogue called practical theology has a meeting place in human encounter and it is through these experiences that theology is informed, formed and Reformed. The most productive way in which to present this experience is through qualitative research. As Swinton and Mowat contend, "the job of qualitative research is to describe the situation (encounter) that enables us to understand the world differently and in understanding differently begin to act differently. Description, interpretation and understanding are thus found to be key terms for qualitative research and the qualitative researcher" (Swinton and Mowat 2016, 44).

The decision was made to gather data from the members of the clergy using a questionnaire. Cameron and Duce purport, "it is possible to use questionnaires to gather qualitative data for an interpretative study. This enables a mixture of closed and open-ended questions to be asked to a larger population sample than is possible through interviews and focus groups" (Cameron and Duce 2013, 16). Therefore, eliciting clerical opinion and practice by using a combination of both open and closed questions, I was able to find out what had been their experiences, liturgical formulas, and practices in dealing with couples

facing involuntary childlessness. The use of the open-ended questions facilitated unique answers pertinent to the questions as opposed to only ticking boxes with predetermined responses. Whilst some answers could be answered with a simple yes or no, the range of questions gave ministers the freedom to provide their own frank responses and opinions. The idea of gathering exploratory data from the clergy was considered important because it was discovered from the literature review those certain activities performed by the clergy produced celebration on the part of some parishioners and dread on the part of others. For example, the sacrament of infant baptism was identified as problematic, at least for some of those experiencing involuntary childlessness (PCI 2006, 3, Scrivener 2019, Swanson, 2008). With this being the case, I was interested to find out if the clergy were aware of such a connection and if so, how, if at all, they sought to address it. By narrowing the discussion to baptism and the baptismal liturgy, this also provided a basis of institutional reflection beyond simply adjusting attitudes and perspectives in that it might facilitate a change of practice. If the PCI is not going to stop baptising children, then it may reveal what liturgical changes are required to make baptism a covenant act for the entire community and not solely one that celebrates biological fruitfulness. Therefore, selecting clerical attitudes towards baptism created a two-fold opportunity for the clergy to reflect upon their own perspectives and practices and for the institution to reflect upon its liturgical formulas. It was also generally perceived at the institutional level that the practice and use of liturgy was not uniform, yet there was no previous study seeking to quantify this. The idea was that whilst this research might lead to recommendations for changes, the snapshot focus on at least one practice could also open the possibility of the need for other practices and attitudes to be changed as well.

The second group of participants in the study were the fourteen parishioners interviewed about their experiences with involuntary childlessness. They were the primary

focus of the study, and the interview method was chosen given its strengths because qualitative research enables participants to explore the multi-layered experiences of personal narrative. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, the lived experiences of respondents were more appropriately discovered, as Marshall and Rossman maintain:

One cannot understand human actions without understanding the meaning that participants attribute to those actions – their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and assumptive worlds; the researcher, therefore, needs to understand the deeper perspectives captured through face-to-face interaction. (1997, 57)

This approach was the preferred means of gathering the information from participants since the question here was not one of duplication, as often associated with quantitative research, but rather of representation. As Silverman contends, “treating interviewing as a social encounter in which knowledge is actively constructed suggests the possibility that the interview is not so much a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but rather a site of, and an occasion for, producing reportable knowledge” (Silverman 2008, 141).

It was to this reportable knowledge that the researcher was trying to gain access, but the interview process also enabled the observation of the complexity of human experience as Ritchie and Lewis write:

Very complex systems, processes or experiences are generally best addressed in in-depth interviews because of the depth of focus and opportunity for clarification and detailed understanding. Similarly, understanding motivations and decisions, or exploring impacts and outcomes, generally requires the detailed personal focus that in-depth interviews allow. (Ritchie and Lewis 2008, 58)

Whilst adopting the methods of survey of the clergy and in-depth interview for parishioners as being most effectively carried out by qualitative methods, one final area of consideration was the use of textual sources. Documentary analysis was also undertaken and seen as necessary because Cameron and Duce commented on the immense value of “the grey

literature, liturgical texts and reflective writing from faith-based communities for research as they outline the espoused theology of the organization which can then be compared to data gleaned from other methods such as interviews and operant theology” (2013, 143). For this reason, the present research included the analysis of 'grey literature' as a useful starting point for comparison with the data of lived experiences, and for revealing much of the 'operant theology' expressed and experienced by the parishioners. This analysis was done in the firm belief about the importance of liturgical texts in a confessional church as Cameron and Duce maintain, “liturgical texts can reveal a huge amount about the espoused and normative theologies of an organisation or church” (2013, 143). Reflective writing is also present in the study through the work of Dr Graham, an Irish Presbyterian, writing personally about involuntary childlessness in her book *The Inconceivable Truth: Reconceiving Infertility*. In addition to this kind of 'reflective writing' or theological reflections, reference has also been made to books and articles written by other Irish Presbyterians whose writings have shaped and influence theological perspectives on the topic. This was done with a mindfulness of the limitations embedded in analysing any 'static text' as they do not always represent the denomination's opinion or practice. Nevertheless, they are still a valuable source of ideas and opinions on matters important to the church even though words can have multiple meanings, and, unlike in-depth interviews, the text is static and cannot be questioned to produce verbal clarification.

3.4.1 Method of Data Analysis

The process of gathering and analysing the data was executed manually. The transcriptions were read through twice and checked for accuracy. When the transcript was deemed to be unclear or inaccurate, the recordings were listened to again and appropriately amended. This first stage of reading and re-reading the transcripts was helpful to highlight the

emerging themes, which were manually noted. However, the second tier of data analysis was computer aided. After uploading the transcribed Word documents into MAXQDA software, the parishioners' interview data went through a more robust analysis. The main advantage of MAXQDA is its ability to systemise large quantities of data, thus, enabling them to be refined into smaller, more manageable units. This allows for the detection of themes and patterns arising from the highlighting of the frequency of words or phrases which also permits cross-comparisons with and between respondents, in terms of both convergence and divergence.

However, regardless of the efficiency of MAXQDA, the software is not without its limitations as is all computer-aided software, which operates only after human input. This means the created categories for arranging the material are constructed subjectively by the researcher and, as such, a human template is placed over the material to assist with the interpretation of the data. One thing that became quite clear after arranging the material was that the frequency of the occurrence of a term did not equate to intensity. Therefore, although some words may appear 'more often' revealing the number of times the respondents expressed a particular attitude or emotion, this did not necessarily equate with assessing the intensity or importance of the identified emotion. Consequently, the researcher could inadvertently fall into the temptation of adjudicating numerical frequency, like one does in quantitative studies, with significance or importance. When seeking to address this problem, I looked at the surrounding context of some of the less frequently mentioned emotions to determine the importance the respondents had placed on that particular emotion. In seeking to do this, it meant that no emotion was marginalised as a result of being mentioned less often.

As the data were gathered and analysed, it soon became apparent that the research was dealing not simply with the recording of details, but also with often painfully lived lives.

At times, the emotion expressed was palpable and occasionally respondents battled through the tears to reveal their stories. A characteristic of story-telling is that it attempts to make sense of our world, and in seeking to narrate our story, we understand that world a little better by trying to make sense of the ‘Why’ and the ‘What’ is happening. This allows participants to profess their identity and find hope (Ackermann 2006).

In seeking to give expression to these stories, it was felt that a modified phenomenological approach was the most appropriate way of both constructing and interpreting the lived experience of the participants. By using this approach, it allows those narratives to be both ‘humanised’ and made ‘habitable’ (Tordres 2007) rather than reducing those experiences to formulaic or mathematical equations. As the chapter progresses, those themes that were identified through the reading of the transcripts and by the computer-aided analysis will be considered.

3.4.2 The Research Setting

The PCI on its website describes itself as, “very much a part of local community life and an integral part of wider society” (PCI, 2021). The denomination is Reformed without a fixed liturgy, possessing:

a strong emphasis on the Sovereignty of God, the Kingship of Christ and the authority of the Bible. The word 'Presbyterian' itself describes the form of Church government, which emphasises the individual and corporate responsibility of the members. Ministers and members share in the organising and running of every aspect of the Church's work” (A Brief Guide to PCI" Accessed June 26).

There are three levels to the governance of the Presbyterian Church. The General Assembly is the highest ruling court of the church and meets annually for one week of the year. Only ordained ministers and their representative elders have voting rights to determine the policies and procedures of the denomination. The next level of governance is Presbytery

and is responsible for all Presbyterian Churches within its geographical bounds. The presbytery consists of all ordained ministers, active or retired, from that region and their representative elders. Whilst the Presbytery invites representatives from special interest groups like youth and women's ministry, only ordained ministers (active or retired) and representative elders are entitled to vote on any resolution. The final layer of governance is the Kirk Session led by the minister known as the 'moderator' and the elders who have received voting approval of the local congregation. Ministers are known as 'teaching elders' and all other elders as 'ruling elders.' Both ministers and elders are ordained into their respective offices and the positions as teaching or ruling elder are regarded as permanent 'offices' within the PCI. Whilst a congregation must approve by a selection and voting process the potential elders, it will be the Presbytery who interviews, approves, and ordains them to the office of elder in the local congregation.

A congregation within the PCI consists of all who wish to attend what is known as the 'visible' church and the 'communicant members' as those who have confessed their faith in Jesus Christ publicly and wish to become full members of the Presbyterian Church. In order to become a full member, your name must be submitted to the Kirk Session for approval. Once a person becomes a communicant member, they can vote on any of the issues presented to the congregation by the Kirk Sessions as well as when a new minister is to be chosen to lead the congregation. Whilst all who attend the church can be involved in the day-to-day running of the church and its ministries, communicant members are expected to be fully involved in the life of the congregation. The style and format of the Sunday worship will vary depending on the preferences of a congregation; nevertheless, preaching is given a high priority as people are called to worship God through singing and prayers.

Ministers will often speak of the importance of Word and Sacrament. The teaching of God's Word accompanied by the appropriate reverence and practice of 'coming to the Lord's Table and administering baptism to all who are members of God's covenant community (including children) is fundamental to their faith and practice. Therefore, all communicants are called to partake in the sacrament of communion and to present their children for baptism if God should gift them with a child. It is presumed, though not explicitly stated, that this includes both biologically and socially parented children. The theological beliefs of clergy and elders would be broadly Calvinistic based on the ministers and elders having to sign the subordinate standards expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

3.4.3 Population and Sampling

As of 2017, PCI had a total membership of 217,363 and 608 clergy stretched across 537 congregations (PCI 2018, 25). The study focused mainly on the knowledge and experiences of a small number of clergy and parishioners and a combination of a small survey and semi-structured interviews was chosen for collecting the data. Given that this was also a qualitative study, and the objective of the research was not to provide generalisations, but insights and understandings, there was no need for random sampling and so in the case of the clergy, purposive sampling was applied, and self-selected or voluntary response sampling for the parishioners.

3.4.4 Questionnaire Analysis: The Clergy

During the early stages of research, I realised that the complex interplay between the institution and the parishioners could not be ignored, hence, the inclusion of the clergy in the research. In their case, the use of a qualitative survey was considered in keeping with the objectives of the study, which was to gain insight and understandings into the opinions and practices of these ministers. It was also thought that in the process, previously unknown

issues could be revealed and there was also the possibility that these could lead to much more intensive research in the future. Therefore, in order to engage in this first level exploratory investigation, purposive sampling was the preferred option as Ritchie and Lewis said:

The sample units have particular features or characteristics, which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles which the researcher wishes to study. These may be socio-demographic characteristics, or may relate to specific experiences, behaviours, or roles. (Ritchie and Lewis 2008, 78)

A further reason for this approach was the fact that the clergy could be considered as homogenous in that they represented a subgroup within the church with distinctive characteristics and all were thought as being able to provide the needed information regarding infertility (Creswell and Clark 2007, 112).

A systematic approach was adopted in choosing of the small purposive sample, therefore, out of the nineteen existing presbyteries, six were chosen representing those from cities, towns, and rural districts in the following proportions - three from the city regions, two presbyteries containing the largest selection of town churches and one from the presbytery considered as having the widest rural spread of churches. This was done to ensure some amount of diversity of practice and opinion. A total number of one hundred and twenty-five ministers in those six presbyteries were identified as potential participants who were considered as eligible if their name appeared as a minister under the care of that particular presbytery. Once identified, each minister was sent a personal email outlining the nature of the research and a link to complete a digital questionnaire. Of those one hundred and twenty-five clergy, forty-three responded by returning their questionnaires. Twenty-four of these responses were from town presbyteries, twelve from the city and seven from the remaining

rural presbytery. Although the number was small considered valuable as each response would provide important insights into their awareness of infertility and baptismal practices.

3.4.5 Interview Analysis: The Parishioners

The nature of the study precluded the use of random sampling since it was a qualitative study, implying the involvement of a small number of persons who were then asked to participate in semi-structured interviews to provide the needed data. However, the decision was made to use self-selected sampling instead of purposive for several reasons. Unlike the clergy, the congregants were much more numerous and harder to categorise into any kind of broad grouping. Further, identifying the specific subgroup of individuals – those who were infertile – was a delicate issue, and an almost impossible one. Added to this, such information was extremely confidential and finding this out by consulting the church records would be a serious breach of the data protection act. Therefore, the decision was made to use a self-selected or voluntary response sample as the participants would volunteer to participate, irrespective of where they came from.

In order to arrive at the sample, an article was placed in the *Presbyterian Herald*, which distributes 25,000 copies to homes throughout Ireland. In that article, I briefly outlined my own pastoral observations regarding childlessness and called upon the church to have greater awareness. Those wishing to take part were encouraged to make contact. The criteria for participating in the study were given and these were: participants must have been or still currently a member of PCI, and that preference would be given to those who had never been able to have biological children. The article gave the readership the opportunity to contact me through a dedicated email address used for the research. Thirteen responses came from possible participants outlining their interest in the subject matter from which nine were selected because they met the criteria. Of these, two actually had biological children after a

period of medically defined infertility with one of them having experienced the problems of secondary infertility. It was decided to include them because it was believed that they would add a new dimension to the concept of infertility.

Bearing in mind the need to limit the number, it was still felt that there was room for a few more participants, and so, information about the research with an invitation to participate was placed on social media. By this method, another five persons were selected, and the last individual was invited to participate via email because she had already written on the subject. It was believed that this participant would add value and a possible alternative perspective to the research, based on the assumption that most of respondents may have undergone significant challenges due to infertility. In all, fourteen participants took part in the study and were interviewed.

The socio-economic position of none of the participants was required, however, throughout the interview, indications were that all fourteen candidates were gainfully employed and had accessed a good level of education. Eleven of the interviews were carried out in the homes of the candidates, one in the person's place of employment, and two in my church office. The interviews ranged between forty-five to sixty minutes in duration. The geographical spread of the group was determined based on the participants choosing to identify their church as city (two persons), town (ten) and rural (three). Though not designed as a criterion for selection, it was thought that the diversity of their ages and experiences would certainly add value to the study and so, the respondents were classified into three age groups. The twenty-nine – thirty-four-year-olds (two individuals) who were seen as those likely to be most hopeful that treatment and age would give them an advantage for having children. The thirty-six–fifty-four-year-olds (ten) were viewed as those at the lower end having not yet given up the possibility of having biological children, and with the others

possibly experiencing a growing sense of resignation to being infertile. Those of fifty-five years plus (three), had reached an age where childbearing had become less likely. Having reached this age category such contributors would provide a fuller picture of contending with childlessness over an extended period of time.

There was the intention to include both male and female perspectives throughout the research as the latter had been well-documented within the current literature. However, on two occasions, the male participants declined to take part and only the females in the relationship narrated their stories. However, at one of the interviews, it was the male who represented both sets of opinions, as his female partner was not present. This helped to bring a slightly different perspective to the research.

3.4.6 Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis is valuable for providing supplementary information and for contextualising the research and so it was decided to also use this method of data collection. Given the limited number of items available from the PCI on the topic, the resources were easily identifiable and accessible. The most obvious material relating to institutional policy was found in the annual reports of the General Assembly of the PCI produced annually and so I collected the last twenty years of reports for examination. This meant that all possible documents relating to the official perspectives and provision for pastoral care released in these reports were consulted and analysed. All the booklets relating to childlessness were obtained through the process of enquiry at the denominational headquarters and by trawling the denominational website for any additional information considered relevant to the research. Therefore, in relation to the General Assembly reports and the denominational literature relating to the subject, all known material was identified and used.

What was less certain was literature written by individual members of the PCI relating to theology that might be useful to the subject matter. Attendance at the official college library and scanning the internet revealed some useful material for the research, but there is no way of knowing if this can be quantified as being fully representative of all that has been written by members of the PCI. To the best of my knowledge, all known resources were consulted, and a claim for being comprehensive in coverage cannot be made. However, this should not lessen the valuable contribution that the opinions and perspectives of the PCI found in the available literature made in the evaluation of the experiences of childlessness within the denomination.

After describing the population and sampling methods used for the clergy and the parishioners and explaining the documentary analysis process, attention must now be turned to the data collection methods and instruments of the research.

3.5 Data Collection Methods and Instruments

As previously explained, the decision was made to do a survey and to use a questionnaire (See Appendix 1: Clergy Survey Questions) to gather information from the clergy while semi-structured interviews were used with the parishioners (see Appendix II: Parishioners Interview Questionnaire), and then documentary analysis for the PCI literature. The rationale for the use of each of these methods will be discussed as well as the nature of the contents of the questionnaire and the interview schedule.

The mapping of any research project is critical to its success and involves the initial identification of the problem through to the publication of the results (Punch, 2005). To effectively identify the research question and produce a credible finding, a step-by-step

process must connect the research question to the data (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), thus, the most appropriate method or methods must be engaged. Cameron and Duce suggest that:

The key thing in designing research is to ensure that the question is framed in a way that is coherent with the approach and that the methods used are coherent with the question. It would be helpful to check out with people how they would respond to a particular method given what you want to find out. So, for example, if I am trying to find out about how you feel about something, are you more likely to respond through a questionnaire or through an interview. (Cameron and Duce 2013, 34)

During the early stages of research, the complex interplay between the institution and the parishioners was realised and could not be ignored, leading to the inclusion of the clergy in my research. For this group, a questionnaire was chosen to collect the data because it is cost-effective, and excellent for gathering a large quantity of information quickly. In addition, it can be completed at any time and place without putting too much pressure on the respondents. Further, the questionnaire ensures uniformity of questioning and an easy and efficient collation and analysis of the results, although, in this instance, open-ended questions were used making it a bit more challenging to analyse the responses. However, this approach was taken because this was a qualitative study and I wanted to get a more in-depth idea of the clergy's opinions regarding their experience with infertility among their congregants. This also explains why open-ended questions were used and the nature of the questions asked as they revolved mainly around the baptismal service during which children are presented; blessed and covenantal promises are made in the presence of family, friends, and the general congregation. The choice of this sacrament was deliberate because this special child-centred celebration ceremony has been shown to have the potential of being one of the most distressing experiences for childless couples. Hence, the questions asked to the clergy had, directly and indirectly, to do with various aspects of baptism and the activities accompanying it and whether it was celebrated in the presence of family and friends because this was

identified in the literature as one of the difficult occasions for infertile couples. The nature of the scriptures read and the use of the liturgy or some other source for the vows of baptism were also inquired about.

These are important questions for the following reasons: (a) the use of scripture reveals the theological focus of the minister; (b) the liturgy helps illustrate what congregations are to understand is taking place in baptism; (c) denotes what is expected by parents or congregant in response to God, each other and the child that is being baptised; and, (d) in relation to the research objectives, such questions help determine if the act is perceived on the part of the clergy or experienced by the parishioners as a ritual causing hurt, discomfort or alienation. Depending on the research finding, a different theological awareness, a revised liturgy and a more inclusive practice at baptism may help reduce some of the marginalisation felt by some parishioners.

The central role of baptism in family life cannot be understated within PCI and this was recently evidenced by a debate at the General Assembly in 2018 about what constitutes a credible profession of faith in order to present your child for baptism. This emphasis once again demonstrates the importance the clergy attaches to the act of baptism, indeed, as do many parishioners with as many one thousand two hundred and fifty having their children baptised in 2018. Therefore, what is invariably a celebration for some, may be a painful reminder to others as to what is missing in their lives. If the celebration of infant baptism facilitates such diverse reactions, I was interested to find out, at least indicatively, what a limited number of clerics perceived might be the reaction of some parishioners experiencing involuntary childlessness.

The last four items on the questionnaire focused more on the ministers' awareness of any childless couple for whom the baptismal ceremony and the teaching of the covenant might be a problem. In addition to this, they were asked if they had observed any occasions when infertile couples might have avoided such ceremonies because of the struggles they were experiencing, and lastly, whether the clergy had ever preached a sermon on involuntary infertility. The desire to explore clerical opinion regarding childlessness was considered important, given the lack of written evidence in PCI literature regarding pastoral concerns dating back over the previous 14 years. The research was carried out to determine if this silence regarding pastoral concern was indicative of clerical opinion. If the clergy express little concern as to what some experience during involuntary childlessness, then the voice given to those experiencing infertility might have to cry all the louder to get recognised. However, if clerical awareness and parishioner concern show some correlation, then the possibility of institutional transformation of beliefs and practices regarding infertility might become a genuine possibility.

It must be understood that within the hierarchy of the Presbyterian Church, the role of the clergy is of vital significance, particularly as they play a pivotal role in determining what is important. It is the clergy along with their representative elder who decide which issues should be prioritised, considered, or even ignored at all levels of church governance. Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith is required of every minister and elder and the adherence to and the implementation of its teaching is expected. In fact, the responsibility of the minister is clearly outlined in the Presbyterian code when it states that "the special calling of the minister is the ministry of the Word, in public and in private, the conduct of public worship, the administration of the Sacraments, the instruction of the young and the pastoral care of souls" (2020, 28). Fundamental to that calling is the recognition of

the importance of both sacraments, namely, baptism and communion. With reference to baptism, the minister is required to “encourage the baptism of the children of all such as may make a credible profession of faith” (2020, 29). As such, the questionnaire sought to determine the perceptions and beliefs of the clergy as they engage both the parents and congregation in the act of baptism, which could shed light on any possible alienation childless couples, may experience.

In summary, the method used to collect data from the clergy differed from that for use with parishioners for the following reasons:

1. Certain questions relating to the number of baptisms performed and absenteeism of parishioners during baptismal services could be answered in a closed question format without the need of an in-depth interview.
2. When seeking to find out what liturgical formulas ministers used during the baptism service, these practices could be determined with samples of liturgy included in their returns. A questionnaire provided the facility to gather this information quickly and efficiently.
3. When the perception of the individual minister was required, a survey with an open-ended format would be sufficient to gather the remaining data.
2. The use of the information retrieved from the sample was fundamentally different in substance to that gained by in-depth interviews. The use of narrative in qualitative research is very distinct from the type of information gleaned by a questionnaire, thus two different methods were required. As I was seeking to consider the practices of the clergy as opposed to their experiences and to gather very brief opinions as opposed to extensive expression of their experiences, a questionnaire was deemed entirely sufficient.
3. In seeking to establish which method would be most successful in gathering data from ministers, the working assumption was that it was easier for them to provide survey responses from home rather than scheduling a time for interview. In that way, a higher number of responses could be collected than would have been possible through the setting up of in-depth interviews or focus groups.

Gathering data from clergy through questionnaires aligns with Cameron and Duce’s pragmatism identifying which data gathering instrument is more likely to get the best response from the target group (2013, 34). It also contributed significantly to the research

question by furnishing from the data information that could help to determine what impact baptism had had on their experience of childlessness.

The process of gathering data from parishioners through in-depth interviews is an excellent way of exploring the subject of infertility experienced by many couples by allowing a more extensive investigation into the deeply personal and sensitive issues that surround the subject. I will now consider reasons concerning the value of using this approach rather than a questionnaire. Fundamentally, qualitative research focuses on the ‘lived experiences’ of the participants and avoids statistical procedures that require quantification (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The purpose of qualitative methods is not to generate propositional findings based on a prior designs and methods, but rather to yield a holistic representation of human behaviour revealing both its complexity and contextuality (Greene, 2007). As the research questions are grounded in the very real lives of people experiencing hurt, pain and possible marginalisation, such a method confirms both the complexity of such lives as well as a very particular context, that is, within the PCI. Yet, Creswell’s definition of qualitative research is worth noting:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretative/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns and themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (Cresswell 2013, 44)

The advantages of gathering data in this way coupled to the specifics of this definition are extremely helpful and can be categorised in the following way:

1. By embracing a set of assumptions that require an interpretative/theoretical framework where people make sense of their world by ascribing meaning to their experiences, fits well with the critical component in a critical realist epistemology. Nevertheless, according to Creswell, data can be analysed inductively and deductively to establish patterns and themes, and by doing so and testing theories, it gravitates towards the realist end of the continuum.
2. By undertaking the study within its natural setting contextualises the research within the strictures of PCI (the 'place' under consideration) and the request for 'sensitivity' towards people which is a reminder of the emotive nature of the subject material.
3. In writing up the report, it is the 'voice' of the people that must be heard. Qualitative methods will be an important conduit in articulating their experiences and, in the words of Denzin and Lincoln, have the potential of producing a "set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 3).
4. The reflexivity of the researcher is an essential component of this particular method and of Creswell's definition. The researcher is not objectively independent from the subject of his or her study. Scharen, summarising Bourdieu, writes "First, the social location of the researcher introduces influences that must be accounted for. Second, the social space within the academic field occupied by the researcher must also be accounted for. Third and most subtle – but also most important because of that – is the particular intellectualist point of view, the temptation of the academic to view the world as an object and create for oneself a 'God's eye' view in relation to it" (Scharen 2015, 79). Whilst the Christian tradition might be a meta-narrative, interpretations of it must be treated as an alloy comprising of trust and suspicion, which remains blended and is not always easily partitioned.
5. Creswell maintains that there will be a 'complex description and interpretation of the problem'. The significant interplay between enculturation, dogma, genetic coding, personal psychologies, and group dynamics are only a few of the difficulties that are embedded in the lived experiences of both the researcher and the participants. Again, Elias contends that advancement in knowledge is the most realistic of possibilities rather than any absolute, universal, or final word truth claims (Elias, 1971). This caveat is important to remember whilst using qualitative methods within a critical realist methodology.
6. Within Creswell's definition is a clear 'call for change' and after making the world visible, these (qualitative material practices) have the possibility to "transform the world" (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 3). By combining qualitative methods within a critical realist epistemology real change is possible. To effect real change within the PCI, a qualitative method most appropriately addresses the research question. The lived experiences of the parishioners expressed during the semi-structured interviews, once appropriately documented, have the

power to induce the transformation of existing structures, perceptions, and practices.

The literature review suggests that specific church perceptions, attitudes and practices may contribute to the pain felt by some during infertility. The case studies in chapter four also indicate that PCI parishioners were not exempt from the parallels found in the literature review. Knowledge of some of the major factors contributing to the negative experiences of persons suffering from involuntary childlessness and their own responses to them informed the eleven questions posed to the parishioners during the interviews. The instrument was divided into three sections: church life, how can the church help, and personal faith. Under church life, the participants were asked about the impact of involuntary childlessness on their relationship with the church family, whether they avoided services that celebrated family and children, and their emotional responses to certain events, like Mother's Day, when some women acknowledged that they generated extremely uncomfortable feelings. For example, research findings state that many women experience a sense of shame and incompleteness, a loss of personhood, rejection and depression, among other things. A more probing question that had implications for the clergy had to do with the level of support they received from the church in coping with their situation, and whether they had ever heard a sermon on infertility, and if so, how did it make them feel.

1. The second section of the interview schedule dealt with ways in which the parishioners thought the church could help them handle the situation. An evaluative stance was adopted after asking how they felt being members of the church in that the parishioners were asked to comment on the adequacy of the support received from the church, how well they thought the church had served them, and their knowledge of the availability of resources from the church on the topic. The third and shortest section of the schedule dealt with their personal faith, that is, how being childless had impacted on their Christian walk and personal relationship with God. Such questions were vital in evaluating the lived experiences of those within the PCI that would enable both the articulation of such experiences and the provision of a clear opportunity for pastoral re-engagement by the institution. The selected instrumentation of in-depth

interviews (parishioners) and the questionnaire for clerics had the advantage of enabling a diverse, yet time efficient method of gathering important data. Nevertheless, creating a multi-layered perspective about involuntary childlessness using data gleaned from two different groups by two different methods of collection creates problems as well as opportunities. Some of these are briefly explored below:

1. Intensifying Focus: To gather the opinion of clergy (regardless as to how that may contribute to the research) is essential to establish a different layer of perspective. Not only will parishioners provide the experiences of childlessness within the institution but gathering even limited data from clerics will also enable a perspective of those who help shape that institutional experience. If the clergy contribute to the research, then hopefully, they can contribute to an intensified focus on the subject matter at the highest levels from within the PCI.

2. Time: The gathering of data takes time, which is a commonly recognised component of any research project. In wishing to make the best use of time, it was allocated in the most time efficient manner through a survey for ministers and in-depth interviews for parishioners. By simply denoting parishioners as the core data components of this research project is not to undermine or even underestimate the contribution made by clergy. This thesis will be presented in its entirety regardless of the time required for each constituted component. It is only when all perspectives are assembled together that how the experience of involuntary childlessness affects the entire covenant community can be seen.

Methods: Conventionally, but not always, mixed methods employ a mix of quantitative surveys and in-depth interviews. Generally, the chronological sequence of this is first to construct a questionnaire that provide data to be tested for statistical significance and from those findings develop one or more research questions that will be explored by collecting rich and thick descriptions of the lived experiences of the participants. The alternative is to use what is known as qualitative surveys which do not rely on statistical significance to provide generalisations, but through open-ended questions allow the survey to feedback into the main research questions that are then explored in greater depth through in-depth interviews often, depending on the perspective of the reader, this latter approach is not considered to be as robust or as valid as mixed methods which use quantitative surveys. However, to make such charges is to obscure what we are trying to understand and how it is to be understood.

The temptation is to not distinguish idiographic knowledge from nomothetic knowledge. According to Swinton and Mowat, qualitative research finds its focus in idiographic knowledge, and they maintain

The task of qualitative research is not to seek to *explain* the world in ways that will make sense across cultures to all reasonable people at any moment in history. Rather, the task of qualitative research is to *describe* the lived realities of individuals and groups in particular settings and to give the reader theoretical comparisons and explanations that can be used elsewhere. (Swinton and Mowat 2016, 43)

It is on this basis that qualitative methods were adopted for use with all the participants in the study. Therefore, it was believed that the opinions of clergy would help clarify the research questions relative to the parishioners by indicating if the concerns of the latter were also exhibited in the attitudes and perspectives of the clergy. Not only could the findings reveal the gap, or perhaps even an alignment, between the experiences of the parishioners and the clergy, but also how much work needs to be done at the institutional level to address the issues raised by the research.

In the work focused on hospital chaplaincy, John Swinton employed a more encompassing framework to address a research question. Using a mixed method approach, he explained that he had used a ‘core data collection method’ in the form of ethnography and a ‘less intense method’ of participant observation (Swinton and Mowat 2016, 157). The aim of his research was to find:

. . . workable and shared reality or set of meanings that constitute a response to the question “What do chaplains do?” and that is possible to describe this set of meanings following a process of careful collection of data from several sources that yields, in time and with careful analysis, a picture of the role of the chaplain that is coherent and agreed upon until proved otherwise. In this way the researcher can capture multiple perspectives on the phenomenon under observation and in so doing to build up a deeper and clearer understanding of the situation. (Swinton and Mowat 2016, 159,161)

It was not the number of sources feeding into the research question that was of interest to me but rather the diverse methods used to assist in the research. Whilst Swinton carefully collated the data provided by the chaplains, he did so by telephone interview, observation, and informal interview techniques. I followed this process, to some degree, by semi-formal interviews used to gather data on the experience of involuntary childlessness within the PCI. However, Swinton used a multiplicity of sources and was also prepared to incorporate into his research “observations, interviews and informal discussion with chaplains, patients, staff, and family members at three chaplaincy sites” (Swinton and Mowat 2016, 162).

It is clear from the methods employed that Swinton was prepared to go beyond the ‘core data collection methods’ to gain a greater understanding of chaplaincy work. Of note was the way that the data were collected. The data that were fed into the core method did not require the same principles of engagement in each category in order to contribute to a greater understanding and perspective on what the chaplains were seeking to do. For example, an informal conversation with a patient, member of staff or family member, is very different from in-depth interviews and telephone conversations with chaplains who are very much more aware of what is their role and how it should be defined.

Nevertheless, the perspectives of staff, patients and family members should not be dismissed because their distance from the lived experiences of chaplains is greater or the method of collecting the data different or less intense. Their contribution remained vital for navigating the research to a greater understanding of the perceived importance and duties of a hospital chaplain. I would contend that gathering the perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes of the clergy regarding involuntary childlessness was crucial to gaining a better understanding of the experiences of involuntary childlessness within the PCI. It is also necessary to point out

that the research questions attempted to explore the experience of involuntary childlessness within the denomination. This not only permitted the perceptions of others to be gained, but also actually may have required it. Whilst Swinton wished to speak in terms of triangulation as the method for gaining these perspectives and increasing the validity and reliability of his own research, I am not compelled to believe that the strictures of this model are necessary in every case. Nevertheless, in my case, I was interested in gaining a multi-dimensional perspective on infertility incorporating clergy and parishioners using different methods of gathering data and collating the research. For all these reasons, two different data gathering methods were used and effectively applied to provide the needed information.

It is through this broad and multi-layered perspective that a rich and thick description of involuntary childlessness has emerged. By choosing the appropriate methods to gather such data, the insights gained will enable the PCI and the wider church to make an informed response to the diverse needs of their congregations.

3.5.1 Data Collection Activities

The data from the clergy were collected over a period of four to eight weeks using an online questionnaire via Survey Monkey. All the necessary procedures were undertaken to comply with UK General Data Protection Regulations and the ethical requirements of the University of Glasgow. The combined requirements of both governing bodies included the safe storage of data, the protection of anonymity and confidentiality, ethically approved questions and limits as to how the information could be used subsequent to collection.

Six out of a possible nineteen presbyteries were selected and all active ministers within those presbyteries received a questionnaire. The selection of presbyteries provided a cross sample of city, town and rural districts; three chosen from the city of Belfast, two from

towns and one from a rural presbytery. After several email reminders had been sent to all participants, the survey was closed and the data analysed.

Although the intention was to interview a possible fifteen parishioners, only fourteen were available because of the COVID-19 restrictions in place. The in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out over a period of 15 months which was longer than expected due to the need to be constantly re-scheduling many of the interviews. The ethical requirements were closely followed in terms of how the interviews were undertaken with clear instructions given to the candidates prior to and at the beginning of each interview. The participants were reminded that they could terminate the interview at any time if they were feeling distressed and they could also request that the interview information be withdrawn upon request. The candidates' anonymity was protected in compliance with good governance and the interviews were stored in data protected files and with the hard copies being made inaccessible to the public. At all times, I was mindful of the need to balance the requirements for ethically sound research and the value of the information to those undergoing similar experiences. I will now endeavour to establish the validity and reliability of the research.

3.5.1.1 Validity

Establishing the validity of any research is critical both in terms of its acceptance by others and its contribution to the particular field of study. Nevertheless, significant differences exist in establishing how this validity is to be measured and the fact that, when it comes to qualitative and quantitative research, the term is not usually applied to each type in the same manner (Ritchie and Lewis 2008). Much of the discussion centres on the concepts of reliability and generalisation and the processes used to transfer those assumptions to any piece of research to make valid.

In general, quantitative research establishes validity with processes that are externally verifiable. Such research methods have a propensity towards the observation of general laws and empirical regularities akin to the natural sciences. These models often rely upon statistical causality as a means of measurement and the ability to simulate or replicate the experimental situation. To achieve this method includes the use of random sampling with instruments using predetermined responses through questionnaires requiring statistical significance. On the other hand, qualitative research looks for meanings located in the social and cultural contexts of the participants, in such cases, the processes of theoretical generalisation or transferability establish validity. To a large degree, qualitative researchers reject natural science as the model to follow and values the role of subjectivity of both the researcher and the participant. The natural setting, rather than focusing on environments that can be replicated, is given a higher priority as well as the process of meaning-making by the respondents in the situation where explanation equals understanding. These studies by their very nature tend to be small scale with individuals or focus groups and are very intensive for participants. Thus, purposive sampling is used along with in-depth interviews, focus groups and open-ended research instruments to provide rich and thick descriptions (Swinton and Mowat 2106). Whilst both quantitative and qualitative research use different mechanisms to study the social world, both models seek some criteria upon which to establish their validity. In the section that follows we will outline the importance of validity in social research and the three sub-related themes of rigor, reliability, and transferability that this study intended to apply.

For many years, the debate over rigour and validity of research in the social sciences has attracted the attention of academics. The time and consideration given to methodology and methods is evidenced by the many textbooks, including Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook*

of *Qualitative Research* with thirty-six chapters devoted to research methodology.

Previously, John Gartner et al. had examined the extent and quality of quantitative research in four pastoral counselling journals and concluded that only 5.3% of the contributors had used quantitative methods as foundational to their research, the quality of which they deemed as low (O’Conner et al, 2001). O’Connor et al. wanted to replicate this investigation, only this time, examining the use of qualitative methods by four pastoral journals dating from 1993-1997 – *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, *Pastoral Psychology*, *Pastoral Sciences* and *Journal of Religion and Health*. Of particular interest to this research was how O’Connor used the criteria developed by Nicholas Mays and Catherine Pope to determine the rigour and quality of their own research. Mays and Pope, listed eleven criteria for qualitative research, the substance of which is contained in the table below.

Table 1: Assessing Qualitative Research

Areas	Yes	Somewhat	No
1. Overall did the researcher make explicit in the account the theoretical framework and methods used at every stage of the research?			
2. Was the context clearly described?			

3. Was the sampling strategy clearly described and justified?			
4. Was the sampling strategy theoretically comprehensive to endure the generalisability of the conceptual analysis (diverse range of individuals and setting for example)?			
5. How was the fieldwork undertaken? Was it described in detail?			
6. Could the evidence (fieldwork notes, interview transcripts, recordings, documentary analysis, etc) be inspected independently by others; if relevant, could the process of transcription be independently inspected?			
7. Where the procedures of data analysis clearly described and theoretically justified? Did they relate to the original research questions? How were the themes and concepts identified from the data?			
8. Was the analysis repeated by more than one researcher to ensure reliability?			

9. Did the investigator make use of quantitative evidence to test qualitative conclusions where appropriate?			
10. Did the investigator give evidence of seeking out observations that might have contradicted or modified the analysis?			
11. Was sufficient of the original evidence presented systematically in the written account to satisfy the sceptical reader of the relation between the interpretation and the evidence (for example, were quotations numbered and sources given)?			
Total			

Source: British Medical Journal, 1995 Vol 311, pp. 109-112.

Whilst many of May and Pope's observations could simply be evidence of good practice and the sound appropriations of justifiable methods; certain aspects of the table rely on terminology more often associated with quantitative methods of enquiry. For example, the usage of terms like 'generalisability' (point 4) and 'quantitative evidence' (point 9) are typified within empirical models of measurement. The desire to achieve this benchmark is also evidenced in Manson who also sought to propose a scientific principle regarding reliability, validity, and generalisability in which he perceives "as different kind of measure

of the quality, rigour and wider potential of research, which are achieved according to certain methodological and disciplinary conventions and principles” (1996, 21). It is clear from Manson’s statement that research within the human sciences must at least mirror the rigour of the natural sciences, at least in principle. As one would expect, Manson’s view or in May’s tabulated form has not been universally accepted. As Bryman states:

Some writers have sought to apply the concepts of reliability and validity to the practice of qualitative research (e.g., LeCompte and Goetz 1982; and Miller 1986; Perakyla 1997), but others argue that grounding these ideas in quantitative research renders them inapplicable to or inappropriate for qualitative research. Writers like Kirk and Miller (1986) have applied concepts of validity and reliability to qualitative research but have changed the sense in which some of the terms are used very slightly. (2004, 30)

The desire to ‘ground’ some of the measurement tools borrowed from the natural sciences as evidenced in quantitative research has met with resistance, with Swinton and Mowat claiming that for some, “the idea of validation requires an assumption of normativity and generalization which is the antithesis of the essence of qualitative research in general and hermeneutic phenomenology in particular” (2016, 116). Hammersley also expresses such scepticism when he writes:

Mixing quantitative and qualitative methods frequently involve abandoning key assumptions associated with many sorts of qualitative work. There is nothing wrong with this in principle, but there is little agreement with the mixed methods movement about what methodological philosophy ought to underpin it (Tashakkori and Tweddle 2010). Furthermore, in practice, there is a tendency in mixed methods work to assimilate the use of qualitative methods into the framework of the assumption’s characteristic of quantitative work – yet these require just as much careful scrutiny. (Hammersley 2013, 96)

Whilst I found the table presented by May and Pope helpful in tabulating a rather subjective evaluation of internal coherence, it was deemed less helpful when presented as a ‘marking system’ to establish external, measurable and objectifiable ‘evidence’ of rigour and validity. Many of the questions have been helpful in tabulating good practice within this

particular thesis, but they cannot be imposed as a template for establishing good practice on every piece of qualitative research. Furthermore, whilst for the purposes of this research the conventional mixed methods were a possibility, it was not considered necessary or even desirable. If there is difficulty in reaching an uncontested definition of what qualitative research means and how it should be measured, then this research must seek some consistency between methodology and method. For example, whilst this research adopted a critical realist stance, it did so with the qualification described earlier more as an alliance-of-ideas, a meta-theory rather than to strict methodology. If that is true of critical realism as an apparent methodology, then perhaps, it is more consistent to apply it to the methods as well. Hammersley, building on the work of Denzin and Lincoln refers to qualitative research as a:

. . . trans-disciplinary movement that draws on a melange of interpretivist, ‘critical’ and constructionist ideas, in which ‘new forms’ of research presentation are to be employed. . . given that the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods is a matter of degree, I do not believe that ‘qualitative research’ is a genuine or useful category – any more than ‘quantitative research’. While, at present, we cannot avoid reliance upon this distinction, we need to move towards a more adequate typology, exploring the various options open to social researchers as regards how they formulate research questions, engage in research design, collect, and produce data, analyse it, and report their findings. (Hammersley 2013, 96)

The proposed alliance-of-ideas represented by critical realism facilitates a conceptualised framework in which to conduct research. An extension of that framework permits a responsible melange (blend) of the most appropriate methods under the broadly and most commonly defined characteristics of qualitative research. Whilst any such method is unlikely to concur with strict triangulation, a multi-perspective of documentary analysis, sample survey and in-depth interviews secures what O'Connor labels as 'critical multiplism' - “to increase reliability and validity in methodology, post-positivism utilises critical multiplism. This is similar to triangulation, i.e., viewing and analysing the phenomenon from different standpoints, such as multiple investigators, sample strategies, data forms and

theoretical understanding” (O' Connor et al., 2001, 272). It is from the perspective of different standpoints and theoretical understandings that this research that this research is likely to provide significant insights.

Yet, establishing validity or credibility in terms of this particular research encounters, at least for some, another level of difficulty beyond the quantitative versus qualitative debate. The difficulty with nomothetic truth is that knowledge gained through scientific research must be falsifiable, replicable, and generalisable. Whilst within the broadly defined characteristics of qualitative research, this study adhering to such verification is not possible. Nevertheless, it must not be assumed, therefore, that qualitative methods relying on a different means of gathering knowledge is to be dismissed as lacking credibility. It is necessary to succinctly consider the challenges to knowledge that will be gathered in this research project. The basic premise would suggest that if your knowledge cannot be falsified, it cannot be accredited as being factual either. Expressed differently, if you cannot disprove a statement or proposition, then it is also impossible to offer it as a way of proving your research. Within the field of practical theology, such a criterion is already at variance with what is possible mainly because the experience of involuntary childlessness is set within a theological framework where participants often engage in spiritual disciplines and adopt a theological worldview.

As such, Swinton and Mowat claim that “a good deal of religious and spiritual truth is not falsifiable and therefore not considered to be true, or at least verifiably true, within this model of knowledge” (2016, 39). Nevertheless, the validity of qualitative research is not only referenced by the ability to falsify a statement or proposition, but also how the research has sought to extrapolate, interpret, and contribute its findings into an already existing field of knowledge.

I suggest that the validity of my research is not comprised by its qualitative design or the theological worldview it embraces. However, all research must find ways of gaining acceptance and producing credibility if it is to make a valuable contribution to the field of knowledge. Therefore, when seeking to give voice to the experiences of involuntary childlessness within the PCI it was important to adhere to the following principles to ensure credibility.

3.5.1.2 Reliability

During initial stages of postgraduate tuition, it is not uncommon to hear supervisors remind their students that when undertaking interviews, it is only advisable to stop collecting data when they have reached ‘saturation’ point. Invariably, what is meant by this is that research will only have been satisfactorily carried out when the interviewees impart no new information that would affect the findings of the research. Therefore, by not conducting the research in a particular way could lead to misrepresentation, thus challenging its validity. The validity of any research within the human sciences will often equate to researchers wanting to establish the following: rigour, dependability, confirmability, authenticity, reliability, trustworthiness, independent validation, audibility and generalisation or transferability. This list is not exhaustive nor is it clear as to what is meant by all the terms used because many of them suffer from conflation or subtle adaptation. Within the scope of this chapter, it is not necessary to consider every term but the following three are deemed to be the most critical for this thesis and thus providing a demonstration of validity, namely, rigour, reliability, and transferability. I have chosen rigour as it relates to study design, reliability as it relates to resonance and transferability as a means of relating to others.

3.5.1.3 Rigour

In providing rigour in research, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie outline four principal themes all of which are secured by a ‘step wise’ approach involving the design, conducting, and reporting of the research. The four principles or steps are: identifying a research topic, constructing a study design, analysing the data, and finally drawing valid conclusions. In their proposal, the salient feature of each step includes the following.

(a) Research Topic: When developing a research question, the project can be guided by the acronym FINER, i.e., is the research question feasible, interesting, novel, ethical, and relevant, and can it be answered and researched with the necessary focus, specificity to context and the appropriate time, logistics and resources available to enable completion. At the very early stages of the research, the reflexivity of the researcher should be engaged to acknowledge potential bias that may influence how the question is framed and how the findings are reported. A conceptual framework for the question must be constructed which defines and defends the justification for the question and the methods deployed to both answer the question and interpret the findings.

(b) Study Design: Seeking to utilise the work of Lincoln and Guba; where credibility is founded on the results containing supporting evidence and such supporting evidence must accurately represent what was studied. When this is done, the contextualised information gathered may confidently enable some level of transference of the findings to a different context. Dependability is secured when a detailed description is produced of the study processes so that the work can be replicated. Accordingly, ‘confirmation’ is provided when sufficient transparency in the reporting of the results has been demonstrated which confidently reveals the participants’ responses rather than researcher bias. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie also include the following elements to add rigour, purposive sampling, data saturation, prolonged engagement, and triangulation to provide a sufficiently robust study design.

(c) Data Analysis: The use of software can help codify and analyse the transcripts of participants and may safeguard against anecdotalism or selectiveness. Peer review can also be used to check the transcriptions and coding used and the study design and processes, creating as it were an audit trail of accountability.

(d) Valid Conclusions: Conclusions should go beyond literal descriptions, themed analysis or observed behaviour. Rather, evidence should be given of how the specific results relate to each other and fulfil the purpose of the research by answering the research question. It is essential that ‘closing the loop’ in the research integrates results with the original conceptual framework. The

discussion element should include graphical descriptions that enable a better understanding of the phenomenon and the conclusion providing a synopsis of the study that; demonstrates a unique contribution to the field of study both conceptually and practically and provide the possibility on a way forward to further research questions (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2020)

In seeking to connect the rigour to validity, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie have provided a helpful summary of what is required to provide credible research. In this research project, I have endeavoured to follow most if not all the good practice guidance offered. The construction of the research question was birthed by my experience of pastoral ministry within the denomination under consideration. The research question pertinent to many church constituents fulfils the requirement of the FINER acronym.

The issue of likely prejudice and bias on the part of the researcher in all research projects must be acknowledged. Every researcher approaches the participants and subject material with preunderstanding, which may inevitably affect how any discourse, written or spoken, is interpreted. It is advisable that after the research has been written up that the contribution of the individual participants should be returned to them for consideration and analysis. This is done so that if the researcher had overtly or inadvertently misrepresented them, alterations could be made to more precisely reflect the contribution made by the participant. To achieve this, each semi-structured interview was stored on a recording device and transcribed verbatim, thus ensuring the accuracy of the conversation. However, information relating to the interpretation of that conversation is available to the participant should they wish to ensure its accuracy.

The ability to avoid prejudice in both gathering and interpreting the information is necessary during the formation and the subsequent delivery of the questions during the actual interviews. The formulation of the questions should be guided by the research objectives,

which in turn, should help objectify their formulation. However, of equal importance is how those questions are asked during a semi-structured interview. To protect against detectable prejudice on the part of the interviewer, they should avoid creating causal links between questions and the use of leading questions. Further, they should resist the temptation to comment on answers in a way that might influence a participant's response.

With reference to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie's second observation regarding study design as applied to credibility and rigour, I will give further evidence of that in the section dealing with reliability and transferability. Yet, before such attributions are made on behalf of the research, I have closely followed a clear and precise explanation of the study design, thus enabling the reader to precisely follow the logic, reasoning and transparency used in establishing of method of enquiry.

The process of transcription utilised the appropriate data software (MAXQDA) to establish an acceptable coding method that was reviewed by a data analyst to make sure that all procedures were followed correctly in coding the material. The audit trail also includes the validation of peers who had supervised the process. I now consider how the interrelated themes of reliability and transferability relate to our research and explore how such terms are used.

3.5.1.4 Reliability

Reliability and trustworthiness are often used interchangeably in qualitative research with only minor alterations to each definition when deployed. For example, Lincoln and Guba prefer the term 'trustworthiness' established on the foundation of rigour resulting in the findings being credible, auditable, and fitting (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It could be suggested that they find similar parallels in the natural sciences through the assessment of

validity, reliability, and generalisation. Although it does seem reasonable to suggest that for studies to be deemed credible, they must be assumed reliable or trustworthy. Yet there is no universal agreement with reference to the correlation between being reliable and valid.

Sandelowski comments that, “scholars have increasingly disputed the conflation of validity with either truth or value” (1993, 2). Her concern is when investigators are only able to claim validity if those participating and results respond consistently over time, concur with one another, gain members’ approval, expert review, and peer acceptance. Whenever a rigid application of such criteria is imposed, Sandelowski warns:

What is embedded is the notion of reality as external, consensual, corroboratory, and repeatable. What is being sought (in the aforementioned concerns) are coefficients or agreement or consensus on the nature of that reality. What is forgotten that in the naturalistic/interpretative paradigm, reality is assumed to be multiple and constructed rather than singular and tangible. Moreover, what is ignored in the indiscriminate transfer to interpretive research of the assumption that a valid work must be a reliable one is that qualitative research is an art, or at least as much art as science and that the nature of the narrative data that are mainstay of qualitative work is inherently revisionist. (1993, 3)

Sandelowski cites three reasons for her disquiet. First, that we have not given adequate consideration of the 'artfulness' of qualitative research. Second, any research project inherently deals with the revisionist nature of the stories told by participants, which makes consistency problematic. Thirdly, members’ validation is beset by theoretical and procedural difficulties because “stories are not simply vehicles for the communication of information that can be easily categorised and counted for consistency; rather, they are time-bound, interpretative, political and moral acts” (1993, 5). Frequently, members may be more concerned about their 'literal' realities as opposed to multiple realities presented by the researcher, thus prompting a member to query the re-presentation or withdraw it altogether.

The issue of what is credible or 'valid' and what I seek to generalise or transfer from my research is inextricably linked to my metaphysical understanding of the nature and reality of the world around me. Research conducted with the alliance-of-ideas expressed in critical realism can position itself at various points in the continuum between reality, narrated realities and a hermeneutic of suspicion regarding the use of methods. The reliability of research and its potential to transfer knowledge in a way that resonates with its participants (members), practitioners and general readership is possible at any point on that continuum without imbibing an inflexible realism or uncritical constructivism.

It is possible to work towards reliability in any research enterprise without the strictures imposed by replication. There is merit in considering the proposition of Renata Tesch that qualitative research can find reliability, resonance, and transference of ideas through a more 'artful' enterprise than the unbending caricatures of the natural sciences. As such qualitative research can become:

A representation in the same sense that an artist can, with a few strokes of the pen, create an image of a face that we would recognise if we saw the original in a crowd. The details are lacking, but a good, "reduction" not only selects and emphasises the essential features, but it also retains the vividness of the personality in the rendition of the face. (1990, 304)

To adopt such re-presentations does not dismiss the need for rigour, reliability, audibility, or transferability, no more so than maintaining that the artist is free to perform any "reduction" or re-imaging by artistic licence. After all, if we move too far from what we are attempting to represent, then it becomes unrecognisable. Therefore, fidelity and integrity of representation become crucial components in presenting research that is credible, and without responsible brush strokes (methods), the qualitative artist will fail to (emphasise) "the essential features." As Lincoln and Guba affirm that what is left should be recognisable, retaining something of essence of the original experience being described. However, without

the permission to use a variety of brushes in a particular and uniquely distinctive manner, the imprint of the artist upon the re-presentation will remain hidden, and problematic. In the best of qualitative artwork, the researcher and participants combine to reveal, rather than obscure each other. What is left is a re-presentation that is both thick and rich, but ultimately unique, and yet, resonates at a wider level as something of value and significance.

I believe that by demonstrating rigour, the research can be deemed credible, and I am keen to stress that reliability is not dependent on principles more often associated within quantitative methods. I echo the concerns raised by Sandelowski and maintain that the ‘artfulness’ of qualitative research does not deny or diminish its reliability. In fact, an appropriate study design ensures that the researcher’s (artist) depiction bears resemblance to original narrative provided by participants yet not denying our crucial role in that re-presentation. The existence of peer review, supervision, and external observation of any reconstruction of the lived experiences of participants is available to check that I have accurately (albeit artistically) created something of value and worth to both participants and observers. The question remains as to what degree this depiction can be transferred to another context.

3.5.1.5 Transferability

The ability to transfer or generalise research findings has attracted significant debate. Throughout this thesis I have noted the different perspectives regarding generalisation held by those engaging in either qualitative or quantitative research. However, of particular importance now is to clearly state an understanding of what can be generalised from the research findings.

Three categories of generalisation - representational, inferential and theoretical - can be identified and whilst this is not an exhaustive list it is a useful one. The first refers to the ability to generalise from the research findings to the parent population. The second suggests that the findings from the sample group can be inferred beyond its immediate setting and context, and lastly, theoretical generalisation allows the principles or statements to be given general application in a variety of other contexts.

In fact, it could be argued that two types of transferability may exist within this one project. By using the definition and application of Ritchie and Lewis regarding representational generalisation, the purposive sample may have some level of transference, providing, as they suggest, the basis for such representation is very different than that found in quantitative research. As they stipulate:

Qualitative research cannot be generalised on a statistical basis – it is not the prevalence of particular views or experiences, nor the extent of their location within particular parts of the sample, about which wider inferences can be drawn. Rather, it is the content or ‘map’ of the range of views, experiences, outcomes or other phenomena under study, and the factors and circumstances that shape and influence them, that can be inferred to the researched population. Although individual variants of circumstances, views or experiences would undoubtedly be found within the parent population, it is the level of categories, concepts, and explanation that generalisation can take place. (Ritchie and Lewis 2008, 269)

Whilst the value and significance of the sample survey is neither dependent nor deemed reliable if this position is rejected, it could be argued that a level of transference is possible beyond the immediate sample. It would be sufficient to maintain, as Swinton and Mowat do, that:

Perhaps the doubts of generalisability can be moved on if people think in terms of identification and resonance. Whilst the findings of qualitative research studies may not be immediately transferrable to other contexts, there is a sense

in which qualitative research should resonate with the experience of others in similar circumstances. (Swinton and Mowat 2016, 45)

Whilst this too is not ideal as it could be challenged that such a position can only be credible or valid when considered retrospectively, it does, however, sit more comfortably within the conceptual framework of this research. The survey sample will be evaluated by other clergy and readers and prove to resonate or be dismissed based on its findings.

However, there is no logical reason or breach of consistency in applying a different mechanism of transferability to the data gathered during in-depth interviews where theoretical generalisation could be applied. In doing so, I would reject Kaplan's definition of 'nomic' generalisation, which he says "must be truly universal, unrestricted as to time and space. It must formulate what is always and everywhere the case, provided only that the appropriate conditions are satisfied" (Kaplan 1964, 91).

Such a fixed or precise definition relating to the grounds of generalisation fail to adequately account for the unique and unrepeatable elements of the human experience. Nevertheless, that does not diminish the fact that there are such elements that are shared by individuals across a range of different locations in time and space, and for the purposes of this research, I share the conceptual framework introduced by Sim regarding theoretical generalisations:

The data gained from a particular study provide theoretical insights which possess a sufficient degree of generality or universality to allow their projection to other contexts or situations which are comparable to that of the original study. The researcher recognises parallels, at a conceptual or theoretical level, between the case or situation studied and another case or situation, which may well differ considerably in terms of attributes or variables that it exhibits. (Sim 1998, 350)

Such a description is not dependent on statistical representation or essentialising of the data, but rather exhibits deference towards making a logical and conceptual link between

differing contexts. This not only builds on the parallels evident within existing literature but, from the research, it will resonate with those who transfer what is discovered into a variety of different contexts, thus, providing a present and future context to not only establish current credibility but the ongoing validity of my research findings.

3.5.1.6 Ethics

As the experience of involuntary childlessness can be exceptionally distressing, it is important that the researcher is sensitive and understanding in relation to personal narratives. Such stories are not simply a collection of data to be analysed, but often, the re-living of very painful emotions. All research must possess integrity regardless of the human emotions involved, however, with reference to the subject material of this research, Declan Fahie rightfully points out:

Providing interviewees with a voice to articulate their, sometimes-distressing, stories is a privilege. It is incumbent on researchers both novice and experienced, to ensure that their research journey is ethical, methodologically sound, moral, and ultimately, honest. (2014, 30)

There can often be a tension between more utilitarian approaches to research where the individual, whilst important, must be balanced against providing the greatest good to others and deontological principles, where human actions have intrinsic properties and can be evaluated as being right or wrong, regardless of any greater benefit to society. This is often a very real tension, and the researcher is often conscious of trying to balance both these objectives. However, of paramount importance in this research is the wellbeing of the individuals involved and how to avoid any emotional harm as a result of the interviews. To ignore such an ethical imperative is to disregard the moral principles that govern such research (Liamputtong 2009, 37). That is why the safeguard of informing participants of their

right to withdraw from the research, refusing to answer a question, or if uncomfortable during the interview process to pause and assess their emotional state was emphasised at the beginning of each interview. It was also assumed that participants had felt a certain confidence, desire or comfort in talking about infertility as self-selection was considered an appropriate way of exploring parishioners' experiences (refer to 3.5.2). As noted in 3.12, ethical permission from the university of Glasgow had been sought and approved with reference to the content of both the clerical survey and semi-structured interviews.¹⁰ A copy of both documents is included in (Appendix VIII: Ethics Approval Questionnaire) and (Appendix 9: Ethics Approval Semi-Structured Interviews). As referred to in 3.12 respondents' anonymity will be protected whilst ensuring that the data is stored using appropriate encryption and password protection on my own localised data storage facility. All information will comply with GDPR and participants have been made aware that the materials may be used in future research and be cited and discussed in future publications, both print and online. Participants read about both the provisions and conditions under which the research was taking place and signed consent forms after the interviews. It was decided that consent forms would be signed after the interview process because only then could participants evaluate if the interview was appropriately conducted, and the information retrieved accurate.

3.6 Male Bias, Ministerial Status and Disempowerment

As I reflected upon my engagement in the interview process several concerns emerged. I knew that whilst I was seeking to interview couples the question of male bias had

¹⁰ Both approval letters relating to ethical clearance from the University of Glasgow are included in Appendix VII and VIII. Appendix VII code number 100160218 refers to the clerical survey and Appendix VIII code 100170196 refers to the interview questionnaire.

to be addressed. At least 50% of potential respondents could be female, as it turned out; I interviewed only two females without a male partner being present. Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that the female experience whilst having some commonality with their partners is also at times very different, particularly through the stages of assisted reproduction. As a male researcher I cannot share the same bodily experiences.

This research began as part of the Doctorate in Practical Theology at the University of Glasgow. In the first two years I was introduced to both reflective practice and theories of methods and methodologies. It was during that time I became aware of how feminist thought had, and still does, critiqued an often-male dominated world. Such a perspective informed my sensitivity and awareness as I sought to listen to the very personal narratives of participants.

Whilst perhaps a female from within the PCI would have added different dimensions to this study and sought to redress the invisibility of some participants, no female had been forthcoming within our denomination. I took both a practical and deeply pastoral decision to pursue this research and I hope its pragmatic value will be helpful to both male and female alike. As through the process of reflective analysis I pursued what Foucault proposed, “to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, rather than legitimating what is already known” (Foucault 1992, 9). I possessed a compelling desire to have the narratives of childless couples sensitively brought into the public domain, regardless of what perceived bias had to be negotiated. For far too long the institutional language and practices associated with some aspects of church life had marginalised certain groups. As Pattison observed, certain practices and language can “systematically foster alienation and worthlessness in local congregations” (Pattison 2000, 292).

Secondly, I need to be conscious of my role as a minister. Whilst there are advantages to pastoral experience there are also some disadvantages to showing pastoral care whilst holding clerical office. My concern correlated to an increasing number of questions. Will the fact that I am a Presbyterian minister have a negative impact on the research, based on preconceived ideas of what a minister believes and practices? Will they believe that I am an advocate of the system, or become defensive, and be reluctant to refer to other clerics as uncaring or disinterested in their problems? Will people soften their criticism of 'God' so as to avoid offending me, or withhold what they really think for fear of looking less spiritual than they may like to appear?

Whilst I cannot avoid being seen as a minister in my research, I can mitigate some of these concerns. First, the type of minister you appear to be, may be more important than perceptions of the office you hold. During the research it is important to make the participants feel relaxed and confident to enable honest dialogue. Secondly, participants must not fear that their grief will be sacrificed on the altar of good research. At all times they must never feel manipulated, vulnerable or disempowered even if the researcher is particularly gifted at extracting honest narrative.

Thirdly, I was conscious that having both partners present might have influenced how each partner engaged. I was always left with the possibility that, if either partner had been on their own; then they may have responded differently. The potential difficulty posed by having both partners present is a very real one. Both may be reluctant to express the true depth of their feeling so as to avoid hurting each other. Some men may be reluctant to openly share their feelings with another man, particularly if it is not a medical problem. However, I believe that it is possible to mitigate some of the disadvantages and utilise pastoral office and experience to the advantage of both church and individual.

Over the years it has been my pastoral experience that women are willing to share even their most personal details with a pastor who loves and cares, regardless of gender. I was relying on years of pastoral experience to navigate through some of the possible hindrances imposed by gender and lack of experience in infertility. Also, my experience working as a pastor in a loyalist housing estate for fourteen years introduced me to ‘power politics’. In that environment many people had been disempowered by the threat of violence, intimidation, and fear. People were made to feel vulnerable and exposed to risk and taught to be compliant or invisible. Over the years my responsibility was to create an atmosphere where the marginalised were given a voice, and this was often done in the presence of both perpetrator and victim. The context and content may have changed but the basic skill remains the same. Throughout the interviews that skill would be to detect when one, or either partner, is being disempowered, and to redress the imbalance tactfully and skilfully. Throughout the research a consistent effort was made during in-depth interviews to create a pastorally sensitive environment to allow both participants to remain sufficiently safe to express their feelings thus creating the maximum opportunity for authentic narrative.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis: Parishioners and Clergy's Responses

4.1 Introduction

The study set out to explore the 'lived experiences' of the PCI parishioners contending with involuntary childlessness and to determine more specifically the extent of such hurt and disconnectedness. In doing so, the research sought to identify some of the contributing factors that may have exacerbated their pain and isolation. In addition, it set out to assess the level of priority given and pastoral care provided to the PCI parishioners experiencing infertility, and how those who participated in the study perceived such practices. Therefore, this chapter will first present the findings from the parishioners' data followed by those for the clergy and conclude with a comparison of the parishioners and the clergy's response to baptism.

4.2 Questionnaire Analysis

4.2.1 Parishioner Data

In order to accomplish the research objectives, a qualitative study within an epistemological framework of critical realism was undertaken, using a questionnaire to gather information from the clergy and in-depth interviews to collect data on the lived experiences of the PCI parishioners.¹¹ As the data is reviewed the feelings and responses of childless couples will be collated and arranged under various themes. In a subsequent section the

¹¹ A summary of the inclusion criteria and general details regarding respondents is contained in 3.4.5 (Pg 155-156). Nevertheless, these additional observations may prove helpful. Out of the fourteen interviews, ten couples were interviewed together, three females separately (F2, F4, F13) and male also was interviewed separately (M12). Those couples who underwent assisted reproduction (M1/F1, M5/F5 M11/F11) and F14/M14 had at the time of interview applied for infertility treatment. Those who experienced pregnancy loss (F2/M2, F3/M3, F4/M4). Couples who at the time of interview had biological children (F7/M7, F13/M13). The following couples had adopted children (M1/F1, F3/M3, M5/F5, F9/M9). It must also be stressed that some of this information has been gathered through conversation at interview, rather than the direct result of interview questions. Therefore, it may be subject to a margin of error.

research will explore the existence of contributing factors that may have influenced the emotional distress experienced

existence of contributing factors that may have influenced the emotional distress experienced by participants and how pastoral neglect at an institutional level may have impacted these feelings.

4.2.2 The Emerging Themes

The first set of themes relates to the participants' overall feelings and response to being infertile and reveals a desire for privacy. A section follows this on the various kinds of distress experience by respondents and ends with some of the other factors associated with this kind of distress, including ecclesiastical silence when it is perceived as a lack of institutional awareness and support.

Brody and Frey observe, "the distress associated with involuntary childlessness has been well documented and is generally regarded as a chronic life crisis that influences later life transitions, as emotional distress often persists even 20 years after the discontinuation of fertility treatment" (2017, 152). The long-term impact of childlessness is evidenced by one of the research respondents who remains childless. F4 sadly could not carry her baby to full term, in recounting her story she said:

I conceived naturally to both our surprise, and I just couldn't believe it, but I was actually very sick with it. I had terrible morning sickness, feeling sick all the time (and I would get) dehydrated. I was in and out of hospital 8 times, but I kept being told this [was] a good sign and this doesn't mean that you are going to . . . none of this is bad for the baby, a good sign, because if you were feeling sick or being sick meant that you were still pregnant. But it was grim I have to say [I would get] like maybe an hour respite in the day, but you just feel grim, and I thought, well at least I will get a baby at the end of it. It will be ok.

I had to go into hospital, go on a drip and it was miserable, and it was awful for my husband to watch, you know watching somebody being sick, we had sick bowls all dotted around the house.

The sickness passed and I felt much better, and I thought things were great and I went to get a scan, but they couldn't find a heartbeat and it was all very traumatic because I was told the baby had died and then I would have to go home and come back the next day to have to deliver it.

So, this is 2001, and we think I nearly died after the stillbirth, but I didn't know that, and I didn't get to see him, but my husband did. I just couldn't. I just wasn't strong enough, but it was nice that he was able to see him. They put him in a little box in another room and they allowed us plenty of time. ****actually, did a drawing, I know some people take photos and so on. He said he was really formed and there was no reason, we don't know why, but we didn't take a photo or anything, I think it was sort of pre mobile phones and all that, but **** did a little sketch of him which was really helpful for me later on when I was thinking I should have seen him, but at least that helped me.

The reality of this narrative was still etched in the lived experience of the respondent, as of 2020 when she was interviewed. F4 often tearfully retold the story of her child's death and her experience of infertility. As we narrate the journey of the respondents, each will echo what previous research has indicated, that for some, the experience of involuntary childlessness includes grief, depression, tears, hurt, anger, powerlessness, sadness, bitterness, loss of hope, exclusion, isolation and pain. Yet, the fear of not getting pregnant is not the only one that some women experience, as Tumusiime contends:

Infertile women usually experience deep suffering after repeated miscarriages, stillbirths, or the complete inability to get pregnant for other reasons. After such experiences, some women become afraid of getting pregnant again or seeking more help. They keep wondering whether they were not supposed to be parents, and keep seeking to know why "God did not bless them with a child." (2017, 241)

These are the kind of journeys, which often indicate that individuals or couples experience, multiple losses and stressors and so confirm the findings in previous studies (Valentine 2008, Apfel and Keylor 2017, Griel 1997, Henning and Strauss 2002). In the observations of Apfel and Keylor, "Psychological conflicts involving infertility reach into the

deepest layers of the individual psyche, invade the interpersonal space of the couple, and radiate into the cultural surround and definition of family” (2002, 85). Consequently, this chapter will outline in detail the lived experiences of the PCI parishioners contending with involuntary childlessness and will first seek to do this by determining more specifically the extent to which this hurt, and disconnectedness exist and identify some of the contributing factors.

4.2.2.1 A Desire for Privacy

In modern building design, it has become commonplace to construct properties with full-length glass. However, the greater potential to see out gives the neighbours or streets below a greater opportunity to see in. This, depending on your state of dress, may not be desirable, and it becomes expedient to incorporate a window film as part of the building design. This addition creates privacy as it allows the occupant to view the world and its daily affairs, but it also protects the individual from the undesirable gaze from the street below. It was only after gathering the data and analysing the transcripts that the aforementioned analogy had any significance for understanding the experience.

In many research projects, including this one, respondents will often speak of how they needed to find support whilst undergoing childlessness. There is a desire for disclosure and the need for someone to share the journey. As F2 declared, “I did realise that I needed to do something, so I did ring the counselling services. I was feeling so vulnerable I wanted to talk to someone who was a Christian counsellor. My husband said, ‘Do you want me to phone for you?’ and I said, ‘Yes please.’ He called and asked if there was a Christian counsellor available and I think they were actually quite shocked by the question. They said they had never been asked that question before.” Whilst bodies, external to the church, may have been shocked by the request, when F5 looked to the ecclesiastical structures, she

admitted, “I would have to say, within the church, we didn’t really know that there was any support.” This is a point of view echoed by F6 who said, “We are talking in the 90’s, and I suppose it was hard to know where to turn, or to whom to talk.” M9, speaking for both himself and his partner, stated “It was difficult because we are both involved heavily in the church. It was something that we didn’t feel that we could go to anyone about.” Such reflections would indicate that not only was there a perceived lack of support within the church but that this was felt by both husband and wife alike.

However, the need for support and the inability to find it cannot be equated with a deliberate withholding of support by the institution or local congregation. During the interview with M9, the question was asked, “What sort of support were you looking for at that time?” To this, he responded, “I am not exactly sure; it was hard to define what we were looking for.” The need for support was not deemed essential by all participants. “I just didn’t really feel, I suppose I would be lying if I said I really felt the need to reach out for support. M12 maintained he felt he had “dealt with it ok, better than other traumas in life, but I still think that there is kind of a lack of male support in that kind of situation.”

It is the personal world behind the ‘window film’ that for some of the respondents was difficult. They watched the world carry on as normal, as their own world disintegrated. It was M12’s partner that described her experience in the following way, “We lived in a semi-detached house, and it is the only thing that stopped me from screaming sometimes [because of the neighbours]. If I was crying and reduced to tears, the only thing I could do was cry out in prayer and say to God, ‘why?’ What is going on here, it is rubbish, but you know what is going on, so you know how to help us through this.” It would seem that even within the privacy of her own four walls, this participant had to contain her struggle.

However, I had assumed that the glass containing the film had been constructed externally; that the barrier to being seen was imposed by others and that it was society's disempowerment, exemplified by a system of patriarchy or pro-natalism that had produced their invisibility. In other words, scream and show all the distress you like; but factored into the design of your dwelling is a cleverly designed film of glass, the end result: you can see us, but we cannot see you. One of the research objectives was to examine the extent to which people may be hurt, but it was also to look at any possible disconnect between parishioners and the ecclesiastical world they lived in and to identify how it contributed to their pain. As the transcripts were read and categorised several times, what emerged, rather surprisingly, was that if the societal and ecclesiastical structures had constructed the window film, the parishioners were not always eager to remove it. Privacy had become both a protective film; a shield against prying eyes and an opportunity for them to look at the world outside their window and yet remain invisible to such prying eyes. The contributing factors will be identified later in the research, however, all but two of the participants referred to privacy as a reason for not sharing their stories. This revealed the agonising tension between disclosure and concealment experienced by many of the participants. In order to illustrate this, a few selected comments are noted:

F2: I was not someone who really wanted to talk about it very much and I generally would be quite a private person and it was something that I felt shouldn't really be talked about or that I didn't really want to talk about.

F3 and M3: Very few people actually knew. Our minister knew, our pastoral worker at the time knew, and there were a couple of other people who knew and that was it. We kept it very closed. We didn't really share it with anybody.

F4: One person said to me, "I thought you just didn't want children" and I was so surprised because I thought that it was obvious that I wanted children. But then, not everybody does want children and I could have been one of those people. So, because it is unseen and there is nothing to focus on, if people go through IVF then that is so private so then how can people reach out if they don't know it is there.

F7 and M7: I don't think there was too much support, as such, but then we weren't necessarily broadcasting for them to know... It is a sort of a silent thing to suffer with.

F11 and M11: I could have shared it, but because it was so sensitive and so hurtful to us, I guess, no, we decided not to share, only with our minister and his wife.

Fontenot also found the desire for privacy to be a major theme in her research on medical intervention during infertility treatment concluded:

All the women in this study maintained a level of secrecy concerning their infertility. For some, secrecy meant maintaining employment, but for others it was a means of preservation as they recognized their emotions were very fragile, their loss of privacy was great, and the emotional and physical stress of the situation escalated with every failed cycle and every level of treatment pursued. Maintaining a sense of the unknown by keeping friends and family at bay was their way of preserving some aspect of themselves and their marital relationship with their spouses. (2008, 124-125)

It would seem that the apparent need for privacy was not a static position but encompassed both a desire to remain hidden as well as one for acknowledgment and understanding, even as Panayiotou-Enness also observed in his findings. There was an “oscillation between disclosure and concealment . . . my participants’ experience of infertility was profound, and the presence of oscillation was strong throughout their narratives. There was a need from my participants to talk about their experience but at the same time, there were obstacles to that” (2018, 111). The respondents in this research found their own obstacles to disclosure. F2 expressed her ‘personality’ as being one of the factors that inhibited disclosure. F4 referenced ‘ambiguity’ as a possible reason. In other words, if the absence of children appears not to upset the couple, why should outsiders assume anything different? Couple F6 and M6 identified ‘time’ as a contributing factor. Quite logically, if their situation was to improve, why involve people too early in a situation that might be remedied? M7 highlighted ‘personal choice’ as a component in their desire for privacy, “We

never really went looking.” F10 and M10 regarded uncertainty as a factor contributing to their silence. If you are not sure how to raise the issue to more than just a select few, then perhaps you are resigned to keeping the ‘window film’ in place. However, this apparent disconnect from the normal world going on outside their window might be a recognition of the courage needed to reveal the pain as F11 and M11 pointed out, “It was so sensitive and hurting to us” that they remained selectively silent.

Embedded in the desire for privacy is a longing to have children seen both in the language that participants used and, in the emotions expressed even years after the ability to bear children had passed. If the long travail outlined at the beginning of the chapter is to be matched, it can only be done so by the equally long desire to get pregnant. In the research, two interrelated categories emerged, that of unfulfilled expectation and the need to realise those expectations through assisted reproduction, with the latter also revealing a strong desire for pregnancy.

4.2.2.2 Desire for Pregnancy

4.2.2.3 Unfulfilled Expectations

As outlined previously, there are generally believed to be three types of childlessness - voluntary, involuntary and circumstantial childlessness - and whilst some couples may experience one, or all three at some stage in their lives, what appears characteristic of those undergoing involuntary childlessness, is that the pretext was one of expectation. For some, this hope and expectation is a live and current issue, as with couple F14 and M14 who believed that though their chances of conceiving were improbable, they were certainly not impossible. Nevertheless, F14 described the process of waiting to be included on the list for IVF treatment as, “The next step, at least we are on it. We are in this limbo, not being on the

list is kind of just a bit, I don't know . . ." The unfinished sentence appears to hang in the air like the unfinished process. Yet, for M14, they still held on to the hope that one day their expectations would be fulfilled. Despite the monthly disappointments, they were asked if they were doubtful or optimistic that IVF treatment would be successful. F14 responded, "Mixed, yeah, I wouldn't say always mixed. If you didn't cling to that hope, you would be really low. So, I think we have hope as we still have years of time left [and it is that] that keeps us going each time." M14 retorted, "We go from month to month just hoping." With reference to each disappointing monthly cycle, he said, "We focus on the next one and the next one." This sliver of hope, in the mist of despair, would appear to be a common thread throughout each couple's experience, being felt to a greater or lesser degree depending on the stage of their journey.

In many of the respondents' cases, they had automatically assumed that they would be blessed with the gift of a child, which sadly for many, was never to arrive. Lorna Gibb writing of her own experience in *Childless Voices* observes that:

Waiting is characteristic of childlessness for many people, as it was for me. There were months of waiting, only to be disappointed by the pain and blood that marked each failure, the tortuous waiting for the hospital appointment that exposed the problem and the unlikeliness of pregnancy, waiting for the endless results, waiting for someone to say that your childlessness is temporary. That was a halfway place to be – not childless, because to assume that title was to admit defeat, but also not a mother, not pregnant – a parent in waiting. (Giff, 2019, 147)

The cherished expectation of conception is now met with an increasing realisation that what was once assumed, can be assumed no longer. As F7 declared, "We got married and we assumed that we would have kids." Yet, the monthly disappointment of unfulfilled expectations was all too apparent. F10 revealed, "at the start, I went from having like a monthly disappointment, every month in tears, and feeling like you have an anticipation and

then a disappointment. The further it (went), I would say it nearly turned into despair.” It would be wrong to assume that the monthly cycle was the only time of reflection, and not unlike grief. A respondent’s waking thoughts can be preoccupied with what they do not possess, as illustrated by M11 when he explained that “It dominated everything, it really did. It takes over your life. I suppose we were married in our mid 20’s, we wanted a family, and it does take over everything even if you are outside, seeing women walk by pregnant or hearing those at work, friends, colleagues sharing the good news. I will be honest with you, at times; it was hard accepting their good news.” Sometimes the expectation presumed by outsiders led to respondents using diversional techniques as noted in the comments made by M5, “Whenever you have been married four or five years there is nearly an expectation that you are going to have children and there is the old well, is there any word of you two yet? What is keeping you? And I would say my [spouse] found it easier to say, ‘I am a businesswoman, I am really not interested in pursuing a family,’ which then stopped all of that.” It is these types of presumptive remarks that often only serve to deepen the sense of grief and isolation in a couple.

The realisation of infertility may be sudden, or it could be a growing, creeping realisation as F3 recalled:

We got married in 1993 and the advice we had been given before we got married was wait two years before you think about having children and coming from folk who had been many years married, I thought ok. We lived in a small house and probably about 18 months in, we put the house on the market, and we all moved with the view to start a family. So, we sort of had been living between. This had been going by then 6 years and . . . if things weren’t going to work out then, maybe we could do a bit of fostering. So, for 6 years . . . children and the discussion of children and going for tests, that is all we really ate, lived (and) breathed.

Of course, not all respondents had such pronounced or intense feelings associated with their expectations and certainly not at the beginning of their marriage as F12 remarked, “It wasn’t a set-in stone decision. I think it was just getting ourselves established, set up home, no big rush, just putting down roots and then, we always thought that we wanted to have a family but weren’t going to rush it.” What is of particular note is that the pragmatism of “no big rush” expressed at the beginning of her journey did not signify the later intensity of her struggles with infertility by F12, and as she previously stated it was only the fact that she lived in close proximity to neighbours that stopped her screaming. This was once again highlighting the fluctuating emotions caused by unrealised and, perhaps, unrealisable expectations.

However, it would be wrong to assume that every respondent felt the same way about unfulfilled expectations and even those who did so, it was to varying degrees. One respondent, who vacillated between involuntary and circumstantial childlessness, had not harboured any unfulfilled expectations and whilst there may have been some pressures, she wrote:

There is societal pressure, there is that thing where people will ask if you are not going to start a family yet and you know, maybe, I don’t know. Perhaps, we just looked like the kind of people you don’t ask that stuff; I don’t know. We didn’t get a lot of hassle about that, but equally I never felt, we didn’t feel that driven and we didn’t come under that kind of pressure, certainly not at family level. As I say, my mum never even asked me why I haven’t had kids, but then I think that goes back to my mum’s experience. She didn’t marry until she was 39/40 and she had me when she was 41. Her sister married at 40 and had her kids at 41 and 43, so when you think about it, at 38 my mum thought I was quite young. (F8)

Whilst F8 seemed to have adjusted to childlessness with the observation, “that we didn’t feel that driven, F10 felt they had experienced a type of marital cryogenics, suspended

in a marriage that is unable to invest in a future generation and that, for some reason, she was made to feel like:

F10: You are missing out on family life; you are missing out on investing in a child.

M10: Especially when you go out to a family gathering and your brothers are there, or sisters and they have all their kids with them, and you are standing there the same way as you were when you were 16.

F10: You don't feel like you have moved on with life. You feel like you are just stuck.

Perhaps, it is this sense of feeling 'stuck' or that people cannot move on with their lives that motivate them to explore a variety of options to alleviate their current impasse. One such possibility is that of assisted reproduction.

4.3 Assisted Reproduction

The intransitive verb 'hurt', as used by the respondents, illustrates the experience of physical pain and emotional upset during treatment. The combination of both physical discomfort and emotional disquiet is helpful when considering the experience of some of the respondents. All fourteen participants contemplated medical intervention and eight of those respondents embarked upon some method of assisted reproduction.

Participants in the study identified three treatments they were willing to undertake in order to conceive, namely, IUI, ICSI and IVF. The ethical determinants for each candidate varied and it is beyond the scope and objectives of this thesis to examine what and how those decisions were reached. A few participants in the study maintained that they had decided against any form of medical intervention preferring to try and conceive naturally. If, in those cases, pregnancy had not occurred, no matter how painful, they would accept that this was

God's will for them, as F10 stated, "We decided very early on that we were not going to go down that road and have any treatment," M10, "If God is God, it is easy for him to make these things work, if he wants it to happen." Those who did engage in medical intervention, they made their choices depending on how invasive or ethically compromising the procedures were. IVF can create a level of physical discomfort whilst physical pain is manageable by prescribed pain relief medication, many of the side effects can be eased by over-the-counter medication. Yet the pain felt in the process of undergoing medically assisted interventions in order to conceive is not confined to physical discomfort, because it also brings a level of emotional hurt (or pain). It appears that by resorting to medical intervention, some respondents for the first time realised that their expectations of having children might be problematic, as M12 and F12 admitted:

M12: I think this was an unspoken fear or reality I suppose . . . F12 I can remember, I can pinpoint actually, we had various medical tests done over the course of 6 months and then I remember one very specific appointment I went to with a fertility specialist to get blood tests results. It was at that point where she started to talk about other options, like treatment options. That was when it reality hit me and that was the brick wall. Oh, right, we were at the end of a road here, end of this route and I would go as far to say that it was traumatic . . .

I think I was just expecting something to be slightly wrong, but then there would be another road we could take, you know. I wasn't expecting to be at that point so soon. I think it just hit me that, you know, we could be childless and that to me really made me realise that I really have a strong desire to have a family and the thought now that that plan, that desire just wasn't going to be fulfilled . . .

Once you start talking about it, you confirm that there is infertility, that you are confirming that there is a problem and at the start I was digging my heels in. I didn't want to go down this road, denial, denial, denial. I don't want to hear other people's stories about how happy they are being childless and how content they are or they got their happy ending in the end. I just wasn't ready for that kind of thing . . . to talk to at that level, but I just wanted somebody to tell me the answers or to tell me that it is all going to be ok.

M12 and F12 highlighted some factors underpinning the emerging rupture between expectation and reality. As M12 revealed, he or both had concealed their "unspoken fears"

and, for F12, the dawning of a new reality was beginning to beckon. The “other options” would not be the preferred one, and the “brick wall” denoted an obstacle that removed human agency. F12 indicated that she had relegated the issue to being something that might be considered “slightly wrong” as a coping mechanism balanced against a more suppressed awareness that she was not “expecting to be at that point so soon.” The description of being “childless” was a catalyst in a new realisation which was that she really did “have a strong desire to have a family.” The creeping reality now offset against the expectation was that the process of hoping to begin a family had confirmed that having a family was improbable. The immediate effect was to refuse to accept that the diagnosis confirmed M12’s “unspoken fears”, leading F12 to a response of “denial, denial, denial.” The conclusion to this traumatic event was a reluctance to engage in “other people’s stories” regardless of how that story ended. One can understand how a ‘window film’ has value in terms of privacy, but yet it also locks people into a world where only a few are invited to travel with them.

As F12 described, her end of the road as the departure from naturally trying to conceive before even embarking upon medical intervention as the “other option”, those that had chosen the other option were also to eventually encounter the same brick wall much later in the process as F5 remarked:

Fundamentally, I wanted a child. I wanted my own child and as my investigations carried on (it was discovered that) there was this wrong with me and there was that wrong with me. There were so many gynae problems that they just seemed to drop out of the sky and the more IVF we went through, there was something else identified and it just seemed to get more hopeless as the time went on. I was prepared to go on through treatment and investigations for us, (so that we could) have our own child, but in many ways, the more I tried personally to do it, the more the door was closed.

Once again, this scenario illustrates that as the journey of infertility develops, for some, the decreasing options bring trauma and a sense of hopelessness. As respondents talked

about the “doors closing” and the “end of the road”, an unwanted closure beyond the power of human agency was beginning to occur.

The inseparable blending of physical discomfort and emotional distress is readily expressed by M1 when he revealed the disappointment and failure of medical intervention:

It was the start of the summer and at the end of that summer we found out it didn't work. We had to work through the pain of that over the next year and a bit, and even looking back on it now, we were glad we made that decision (to terminate treatment) because it was such a painful experience, and we knew going into it that the success rate was around 30%. If we had had 7 embryos or maybe even another two, to have to go back through that again would just have been far too painful. So, in that way, it was the right decision. It was really difficult at the time, and we knew it was narrowing our chances, but it meant that we could walk away, and we did. We walked away from ICSI feeling that we had tried this and that was the only way we felt that we could live with it, [considering] what we believed.

From listening to the lived experiences of those undergoing involuntary childlessness, it is not difficult to accept Tonkin's definition of grief. As respondents worked toward conception naturally or by assisted reproduction, the balancing of expectation and realisation triggered the grieving process. The lament for some was a child yet to be formed and the heartache for others was a child they had already lost. Whilst medical intervention had produced conception, even this dream was to be short lived as F3 revealed:

So, at that point we decided we would do another cycle, but that was it. The hardest point was when we decided that we would do only one more cycle and that was it. We are not going to be one of those couples that would do four, six, or eight. So, we went in May 2000 and went back again in November 2000 to pay for the next (treatment) and I was pregnant at the end of January 2001. We went for a scan on the 12th of February and that was when we saw the heartbeat and found out I was six weeks pregnant and four weeks later I had a miscarriage.

It appears that the whole process of the initial investigations, consultations, interventions and, when not successful, was one of disappointment. It is a journey that brings more than its fair share of physical discomfort, emotional distress and, in some cases, trauma.

In all the cases where couples pursued assisted reproduction, it was a shared decision. The desire to conceive was so great that the sacrifice of intimacy and the humiliation felt by some were considered necessary to realise their goal. As M11 described it, “We ended up going to a Belfast Clinic, an IVF clinic and again I was tested. The things you have to do. . .talk about, loss of dignity, you don’t have dignity, having to do that, and I was saying why on earth Lord, do I have to do this, that was really humiliating. . .notwithstanding what my wife had to go through obviously.” In this case, not only was the decision mutual, but also the shared unpleasantness of the process itself.

M11 was interviewed on his own and Enness speculates that when couples are not together such an interview may, “capture their experiences differently” (2018, 14). It was difficult to know if Enness’ assumptions are correct, nevertheless, M11, without his wife present, was free to express his feelings and experiences. M11, in particular, and the respondents, in general, echoed existing research submitted by Webb and Daniluk claiming that men experience, “intense feelings of grief and loss, powerlessness and a lack of control, inadequacy, isolation, and betrayal in response to being unable to father a child” (1999, 20). Whilst it was claimed that men have either been marginalised or underrepresented in infertility studies (Hadley 2019, Dykstra and Keizer 2009, Ennes 2018, Inhorn et al., 2009), the experience of M3 correlates to those research findings. He said, “That is probably a fair assessment you know; the women tend to get the sympathy, the men seem to get nothing... they are side-lined.” Arya and Dibbs claim that men see infertility as a threat and humiliation to their masculinity with the process of seeing themselves as men being called into question (2016). This observation is mirrored in the response of M3: “So, there was almost that element that it was a challenge to your identity as a male, that you can’t impregnate your wife.” More than simply a physical impediment to virility, some men perceive infertility to

undermine what is understood by ‘masculinity’ (Culley, Hudson and Lohan, 2013, Nachtigall, Becker and Wozny, 1992, Throsby and Gill, 2004). Hadley maintains that in his own research, “all [male] participants expressed a complex constant negotiation of the loss of experience, identity, role and intimate wider relationships” (2019, 62) and that they have a similar yearning for children as their female counterparts (2020).

In assessing the literature, it becomes evident that much of the disagreement about the degree to which men are affected by infertility, appears to be between quantitative and qualitative methods of gathering data. Culley, Hudson and Lohan, rightfully point out that, “mixed results of psychological studies which have included men may relate to differences in diagnosis, age, the sensitivity of instruments, the point at which the measure is administered, and the stage of treatment to differences in the socio-cultural context” (2013, 233). The objective of this research is not to deliberate as to who suffers more, but to express the very real pain that both men and women demonstrate in the re-telling of their respective narratives. “The stories have been told, the same themes in different guises appeared at different places in the text. The theme of infertility and childlessness showed different faces, but all shared the shape” (Gabobonwe 2004, 61).

As far as the journey of assisted reproduction is concerned, Delilah Brien’s recent artwork of ‘symbiotic suffering’ presented online, depicts the entanglement of two entities embraced in sadness (Brien, 2021). This piece of artwork creatively and vividly expresses for many of the respondents who underwent medical intervention the intertwining of their relationships and suffering as M5 recalled, “My part was painless; I wasn’t going through the treatments. F5 had to go through menopause on a number of occasions for the treatment to get her to the point where she could actually go for IVF, and I was just sitting in the background with really nothing to do. So, my pain was actually watching her suffering this, if

you like for me. Because I knew what her thoughts were, right I must get **** a child here. We went through six IVF cycles and at the end of it I stopped them.” It is clear from this account that although experientially different, considerable pain was felt by both parties.

In this re-telling and recollection of the narrative, M5 re-lived how he suffered because his wife was suffering. Their shared suffering increased, wedded together in attempting to realise goals that were now unattainable. In an act of compassionate caring, M5 along with his wife called a halt to the suffering they had experienced.

As the respondents began to reconstruct their lived experiences into meaning-making narratives, those recollections surfaced with a series of verbs and phrases detailing their emotions, or emotional responses. The journey of privacy, medical treatments, expectation and feelings of hurt had created a scaffolding of emotions, both positive and negative, as they sought to build their lives towards either a family with children; or family – without children. In my next section I will consider some of the most challenging, and perhaps, most negative emotions they exhibited.

4.3.1.1 The Emotional Distress

In the following section, I will begin to look at some of the most frequently expressed emotions, but at this stage I am not attempting to create a hierarchy of them and their significance, I am only indicating their presence. Neither am I saying that all experienced the same emotions in identical ways. It is just like someone views a piece of art and detects the presence of a particular colour which is unlikely to appear on the canvas in the same way twice as the artist mixes his brush with other colours on the palette. The result is a rich tapestry of human experiences voiced by those who live each day with the journey of

involuntary childlessness. Even so, it is being done with the variety of emotional distress experienced by the respondents regarding their living with involuntary infertility.

4.3.1.1.1 Grief

Of the ‘reported’ cases, at least five of the respondents had suffered from a miscarriage. The traumatic nature of miscarriages has been well documented in previous research. Nevertheless, I began with the personalised story of F4 for whom what appeared incalculable to the pain already suffered was the cold and clinical dismissal of the patient, as she remembered it. “I was told the baby had died and then I would have to go home, come back the next day and have to deliver it.” This respondent paused on many occasions to fight back her emotions as she re-lived some of those experiences. As you would expect, the tragic nature of loss is not confined to just one partner and M11 give his perspective on the day that they were told they had lost their baby:

I remember sitting. I just assumed everything was fine, a healthy pregnancy, this was great. I felt kind of faint when he said that we [had lost our baby]. I just couldn’t believe. I felt devastated and my wife had to go for the DNC in the hospital which was brutal. [The researcher has removed some of the traumatic details] It is incredible how formed it was even after 10 or 12 weeks and, yeah, devastating. We regret not having some kind of funeral and that is a big regret. Then, the following year, we grieved after that for several months. We do regret not having a funeral for the child. The exact same month August 2005 my wife was pregnant again and she miscarried that too and again that was another DNC. So, it was really difficult. I remember we were planning to go on holiday and then we got that, the holiday went out the window, we didn’t go anywhere. It was hurt and grief and pain.

Not only do respondents have to deal with the personal pain experienced by losing a baby, but they also have to navigate the difficult journey of informing others as F2 revealed. “Some people don’t know what to say, they don’t know how to react, like in that wider Bible study group that we were a part of. I didn’t share a lot, but I did share when we lost the

pregnancy and out of that group of however many [people] only one person acknowledged that.” It would seem that, in this instance, the absence of a collective acknowledgement of her loss only served to reinforce that those from whom she sought comfort, remained detached, having little, if any, understanding of her need of them.

However, the grieving process often associated with loss and an expression of emotion, is not limited to the loss of a child after a confirmed pregnancy. This is clearly referenced in F10’s comments: “There is nearly like a process of grieving, where you are trying to get over the fact that there is a child that you might never have. I can’t comment on what it is like to lose a child or anything like that, because I have never been in that boat, but I felt like I was really going through a process of grieving to come to that point of... goodness this might never happen.” Whilst the intensity of the grief may vary, it was also expressed as part of the journey experienced by respondent M12:

At first it was like a head loss, if that makes sense, rather than a heart loss in that this is really rubbish, but you know ‘chin up’ and we will get on with life. We will just keep plodding on and see what lies ahead. It took longer for me to experience the grief reaction. It was never an extreme thing within me, but it took longer for it to kind of sink down in. I think maybe it was just through the job that I do when I really started to look at the young people and think this is sad, it doesn’t seem fair, I wonder why life has turned out like this.

In the interview with F9 and M9 they recounted that exhibiting grief was almost an expectation on behalf of the adoption agency:

F9: They wouldn’t look at you, they wouldn’t consider you for adoption if we hadn’t gone through all the process first of going to hospitals for tests, fertility clinics and all that, that had to be ruled out and then we were questioned and quizzed about how we felt about all this. It was all part of the questions and the system of well, could we cope...

Interviewer: Cope with?

F9: The fact that we couldn’t have a biological child

M9: Because we weren't having the biological child ourselves, they seem to think that we needed a time of bereavement that we could deal with it.

Interviewer: Did you have bereavement and a sense of loss about not having a biological child?

M9: I would say that we did have but not in a sense that...

F9: You got yourself so down that you couldn't... that sort of way.... You dealt with it.

This conversation suggests that there seemed to be hesitancy on the part of some respondents to view the grief associated with the actual loss of a child as somehow different from the grief of not being able to conceive. Lois Tonkin has queried how appropriate or helpful this distinction is in her doctoral work on circumstantial childlessness. Reflecting on Freud, Tonkin wrote:

There remains at the root of his theorizing the presumption of the material loss of an individual, and a loss event that can be pinpointed to a particular moment. Popular understandings of grief that have emerged out of psychological accounts are still primarily associated with the losses of bereavement. In the past thirty years, loss and its associated grief have been interpreted more broadly in individuals' or communities' lives – as an expected outcome of divorce for example, or as a disaster such as the Canterbury earthquakes – but even with this more generous framing, there is still a presumption of the loss, at a particular time, of something which one once had (Tonkin 2014, 123).

To establish the relevance of this as a presumption, a quick consideration of the *Book of Public Worship* (2016, PC1) revealed that the wording appeared to substantiate this observation. Presbyterian ministers are given guidance as to how to conduct services of worship and in a section dealing with the death of a child the following prayer is offered:

We meet to share our love and sympathy with parents and their family in their loss. They shared together a very special xx days/months/years after the birth of N..... Our hearts break with theirs in their loss, and we want them to know that they are loved and cared for at this time. We meet in this place to remember that God cares for us. We will pray for God's help and that he might hold us in his eternal love.

Jesus said, “Let the children come to me. Do not hinder them, for to such belongs the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Mark 10:14) (2016, 38)

The PCI do have a section referring to death in distressing circumstances, but once again it is presumed that the life has already existed outside of the womb. This position was then compared to the Church of Ireland and also the Roman Catholic Church, in both alternatives, a much softer and more sensitive wording appeared to be used. For example, in the Church of Ireland, the pastoral prayer accompanying such traumatic events reads, “God of compassion, we are gathered here with . . . and to honour this baby not able to be brought to the fullness of life” (2020, 3). Again, the scriptural passage used by the Church of Ireland is taken from Jeremiah 5:1 ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you.’ The language here is highly significant, the PCI’s order of service refers to a biblical text about children already born whereas the Church of Ireland’s order of service refers to children not yet born. In fairness, the Church of Ireland has framed their prayer directly in response to neonatal deaths, through miscarriage or still birth, whereas, the PCI has only included it in a section about the death of a child. However, the fact that the PCI have omitted any reference to miscarriage or stillbirths at all is alarming, especially given that they have included funerals in distressing circumstances as an additional service again without any mention of miscarriages or stillbirths (PCI, 2006).

It appears that miscarriage along with involuntary childlessness has not received the pastoral attention that it deserves. If such grief of miscarriage is not referenced, then any grief expressed without material loss would seem misplaced. Yet, Tonkin is adamant that it possible to grieve for a child of our longings. To this, she builds from Klein’s theoretical roots of mourning which states:

In normal mourning, the individual re-introjects and reinstates, as well as the actual lost person, his loved parents – who are felt to be his ‘good’ inner objects. His inner world, the one which he has built up from his earliest days onwards, in his fantasy was destroyed when the actual loss occurred. The rebuilding of this inner world characterizes the successful work of mourning (Klein 1940, 113-114).

What Tonkin is drawing on is that a restoration of the lost loved one is taking place, painful and all that this may be, as the bereaved draws on retrospective image building of the deceased now deposited in their ‘inner world’. If I have understood Tonkin correctly, she is suggesting that the loved one lives on as we remember them as people who remain present with us in our memories and thoughts. Once this is securely introjected, then that person has a more confident sense that, “life inside and outside will go on after all, and that the lost loved object can be preserved within” (Klein 1940, 111). As Tonkin concludes, grief involves, “drawing on the internalized sense of that person in the ways they construct a new life without the physical presence of him or her in their lives” (Tonkin 2014, 124). It is what Tonkin calls an ‘absent presence’ and with reference to her own research maintains that:

Each of these women grieved in some way for this “sense of myself as a mother”, and for the idiosyncratic meanings that being a mother and having a biological child held for her. Some grieved for the child of their fantasies, and for the experience of nurturing that child in an embodied way through carrying, giving birth, and feeding him or her. Some grieved when they had lost the opportunity to be called “mum”, and to be seen by their child and others in their social worlds as a mother. (Tonkin 2014, 124)

The description cited by Tonkin correlates with the sense of grieving already alluded to by respondents F2, F9/M9, F10 and M12. This ‘absent presence’ by Tonkin’s definition is grief just as real as any material loss, not in something that one had, but rather, in what has not yet been received. It is possible to contend that through the processes of socialisation, societal pressures, expectation and individual desire that the process of romancing about children begins long before a child is born. In the case of F14, so embedded is this experience

that M14 states, “That even before we got married, we were talking baby names.” In response to the question about had they ever visualised the existence of a child, M14 remarked that his wife had dreams in relation to children. To this she responded, “They were lovely dreams actually and then you wake up disappointed because it is not a reality.” F14 went on to say:

I have had different dreams down through the years. . .in some of those dreams I have had the baby, in other dreams I am pregnant, in some of the dreams I have a boy and in some of the others I have a girl. . . . We have our own names set aside ever since we got married and every time someone gets pregnant, we are like please don’t use those names.” When M14 spoke of the possibility of his wife conceiving, he said, “I wonder if our child would have your eyes.

It is clear from the last example that the longing to have a child is an intense emotion and, therefore, projecting the life of a child yet to be is as vivid as introjecting a material life that has been lost. In the literature review, reference was made to the work of Serene Jones (2001) who maintains that there are two features tied up with reproductive guilt. First, there is the intertwining of lost agency and guilt, and second, the enormous sense of future loss. In graphic terms, she represents that loss by saying that in every sense it is:

A future loss, a hope forever deferred. Regardless of how one medically views the status of tissue produced by the pregnancy, the women who want the pregnancy is going to imagine the potential life that is at stake in every attempt at pregnancy. Further, she does not imagine it as just any life; she views it as a particular life, the life of her potential child. She immediately envisions it as a person with a smile like her father’s, or thick, black hair like her sister’s. She also begins to measure her own future in terms of this imagined child’s development. She imagines where he, her son, her son will sleep or what she, her daughter, will wear. She envisions him at school or her learning to drive. She conjures up the many possible tones of his voice or the shape of her feet, at birth and then at fifty. The woman’s body begins to anticipate holding the child; she can smell her daughter’s birthday cake; she can hear her son singing in his high school years. Her whole being, it seems, stretches itself into this child’s future, and this future becomes the space of her own becoming. In the words of Paul Tillich, “all time is expectation.” For her, this could not be truer, for she is quite literally expecting this child. And then, her hope dies. (Jones, 2001, 233-234)

Jones in the passage cited is referring to the experience of miscarriage, but its application need not be limited to that situation as elsewhere she states that “Not surprising, women who experience infertility, still birth and miscarriage often feel similarly conflicted about the loss. Further, I am looking at women who in their grief experience the death of hope, the thwarting of an expectation” (Jones 2001, 230). It is this thwarting of an expectation that so adequately sums up the “dreams” not yet realised of F14.

As one of the research objectives was to determine the extent to which this hurt exists, it becomes obvious that the numerical frequency of this loss does not reveal its intensity. The loss of a child reported by five of the participants is a sizeable number, but it then must be aligned along with those who equally grieve without having had the opportunity to conceive. For each, they may have lost someone, but as the prayer in the Church of Ireland rightly affirms, this baby was formed not just in a womb, but in the hearts, minds and the creative processes of the respondents. Thus, the lament about a baby that was “not able to be brought to the fullness of life.” The respondents’ experience of grief resonated with the observations of Moulet’s qualitative research when she wrote:

The data are clearly illustrative of a pattern of multiple personal, real and symbolic losses, as well as tacitly assumed roles and developmental tasks. Unlike death or other tangible individual losses, childlessness represents a largely unfocused loss which is not necessarily recognisable through a process of traditional and time-constrained grief work. In some cases, there is simply no expression of grief, per se, because there is no material loss [except, perhaps, in the case of miscarriage] and, more often, the meaning of loss in its many dimensions emerges, progressively, with the effluxion of time and with comparisons made socially against parents and families (2005, 145).

Whilst some may wish to stratify the loss incurred, we would, however, be hard pressed to differentiate between different types of grief. Yet, underpinning the different expressions of grief lay a variety of emotions and as each participant expanded on their narrative, the pain appeared raw, and the emotions were eminently visible.

4.3.1.1.2 Anger

As F4 continued her recollection of the death of ****, her baby son, she recalled how life had been difficult before confronting the challenge of childlessness:

I suppose at one point I realised that, up at **** (graveyard) I buried my brother (31 years of age), my father (67 years of age), and my son, kind of in that order and that obviously influences your faith because it is kind of not (what you) expect... [I then asked her, were you angry with God?] I did go through, I think...a period of anger because I had gynaecological problems my whole life since I was 14. I remember going through terrible pains and I sometimes had to be taken into hospital and I remember thinking, oh well I have put up with all this. . . . I remember my mum (saying about my birth) when I was going through a lot of pain that she hadn't seen childbirth like it, and I was like wow, well at least you get a baby at the end of it. So, I was angry at God. I was angry, why did I have to go through all that and still get nothing at the end of it.

For F5, the process of IVF and having to contend with her own 'driven expectations' had produced the following reaction:

F5: For about seven years, I was more driven and more consumed by it with every unsuccessful cycle... after every failure you are nearly more determined to make it work the next time and you know the devastation gets worse with every failure. But in many ways, it made me more determined to carry on, to strive for success, irrespective of how many cycles it took. I would have gone through it another six times.

Interviewer: So, you stopped, why?

M5' I said to stop?

F5: Yes, he said that was it.

M5: I wasn't participating in it anymore.

Interviewer: How did you feel at that time?

F5: I was distraught. I was cross at ****. I was cross at the Lord. I just thought what am I going to do here? This child that I want, is that it? I was just lost.

Both these respondents demonstrated anger directed toward God and the second towards her husband as well, particularly when he was perceived to be impeding the possible

success of the treatment, regardless of the statistical probability of conception. Annoyance towards God emerged in interaction with other respondents, for example, during a conversation with F10 and M10:

F10: I suppose I feel like, as a female there should be this part of your life where you have kids. . . . I am more focused on family life at home whereas I am in a job that I don't particularly enjoy, I am stressed out continually and I don't understand how I have ended up in this place. It is a place where I never intended to be, it was not part of my goals in life to have a career, earn loads of money. It wasn't on my list of priorities, but I have ended up there by default in something that I don't particularly want.

M10: If you had a family, you would be at home at the minute.

F10: Yeah

Interviewer: Is that where you would want to be?

F10: Yeah

Interviewer: Have you ever got annoyed with God in the sense...

F10: Yes

Interviewer: Does he know that?

F10: Yes

Interviewer: He has heard that?

F10: Yes, he has heard that plenty of times

Interviewer: Did that make you feel better or worse?

F10: Worse, because then I feel guilty

Interviewer: Why?

F10: Because I am not trusting God the way that I should. I am not, I say that I am taking him at his word, that I trust him to direct my paths and all of this, but I am not really because I am frustrated at him sometimes.

F10 acknowledged both anger and guilt as a response to her childlessness. The basis of her guilt was that she had directed her anger towards God based on what appeared to be frustration. It is unclear if the frustration was that she had not been able to produce children,

or that God had not revealed what His will is for her life. Regardless of which response was intended, she exhibited disquiet and annoyance directed at God. M11 introduces other elements to the anger he possessed. Since he had reacted to the humiliating preparation involved in assisted reproduction, he freely admitted, “I was talking to God about the hospital and all of that and the humiliation of having to do that, and yes, it did, it brought me closer (to God) in terms of honesty and even, I am embarrassed to say it, I would have shaken my fist in anger (at God). I would have to inject my wife with all sorts of different chemicals, the IUI, and then still go to work, still serve in the Church which we were doing and continue to do.” Here, once again, the respondent indicated feelings of anger and embarrassment. Both respondents felt that their anger towards God was inappropriate and consequently experienced guilt. However, additionally, M12 admitted the frustration of trying to carry on as normal, “and then still go to work” and “still serve in the church.” Presumably, these actions were considered very difficult, being seen as a conflict between the more concealed struggles of infertility and the more public requirements of work and church ministries. M12 cited another area that fuelled his anger regarding infertility, “It is never going to happen, and then you hear about the latest pregnancy, and you are thinking, God’s blessing them what about us, he has forgotten about us, what’s the point in praying to God if your heart is bleeding.” M12 concluded that seeing others ‘blessed’ by God and perceptions of divine abandonment made even his praying appear pointless.

However, not everyone recognised that they were angry with God at the time, and it was only after a period of personal reflection that this emotion began to surface. F1 only realised how angry she had felt when she recalled, “We were in vacancy (at the church with no minister), and we were hurting, really hurting and very few of the congregation knew why we were hurting. I know I was really angry with God, but I couldn’t have told you that, it is

only now looking back I can say I was furious with him. I was so cross with him that I couldn't talk to him and that made it worse." During this period, F1 seemed incapable of identifying all her emotions and, in particular, her anger. As she reflected upon the experience, she worked retrospectively, assuming that the breakdown in communication with God (I couldn't talk to him) was because she was "so cross." Again, it is unclear if "and that made it worse" refers to igniting more anger or if she had reduced her anger then, perhaps, she could have communed with God more effectively. Nevertheless, perhaps no clarification is required as the net outcome was that the rupture in relationship with God exacerbated the negativity of the situation. The research respondents manifested similar negative feelings associated with other research findings. For example, Williams lists 'anger' as one of the eleven themes emerging from her interview process with infertile women (Williams 1997). Langher et al. list anger as one of four strong negative emotions encountered during infertility along with pain, dejection and frustration (2019). Fontenot claims that, during her research, a cycle not dissimilar to grief had been engaged, including anger, "However, the process of dealing with the losses associated with infertility seem consistent from one person to another as each one went through the denial, anger, acceptance, and peace phases of grieving" (2008, 126).

So far, the recipients of this anger have been God and a spouse, but F8 reserved her annoyance for the PCI. F8 had felt little pressure or lack of fulfilment but had reacted to her perception that PCI had recently been stressing the role of procreation within marriage as a powerfully desirable, if not necessary, goal of every relationship. F8 believed that the renewed emphasis upon procreation in marriage was a direct result of their defense of a traditional understanding of marriage against the LGBT community and, in this particular context, she remarked:

It kind of annoyed me because, as I say, it was like winning the argument on that issue was justified...and in order to win that argument it didn't matter about the collateral damage, it is a justification for our argument rather than just thinking if we say this, what are we doing to people who are in that situation (childless), and there is no point coming to me afterwards and going, Oh well, I can understand you are upset and I am sorry you don't have children. I wasn't asking for pity; I don't need pity. . . . It has definitely affected my relationship really negatively with the Church and it was the first time in my life that it had ever been an issue. Actually, my experience with the Church generally had been a positive one largely because of the people I knew. . . . I just felt like I was part of something that I no longer understood.

I will return to the implications of F8's observations later, however, it is clear from her response that the position adopted by the PCI, real or otherwise, had caused annoyance. The implications of such a strong procreative line, in this case, has led to the viewing of childless couples as part of the "collateral damage" of a war waged in other areas. Therefore, anger and frustration exist at various levels when it comes to the experience of the PCI parishioners as they contend with involuntary childlessness, and sometimes, this can be directed at a life partner, God, or in the last example – the PCI itself.

4.3.1.1.3 Blame and Guilt

The feelings of blame were sometimes exhibited by participants, and it was often self-directed and expressed by either one or both partners as F6 and M6 revealed:

F6: We were approved (for IVF), that was the awful thing, we were approved, and all set up to go.

M6: It didn't work out with the circumstances and there are probably all sorts of issues in the process and the way it was handled and you are in a system in a process...and there are so many (other) people and factors involved in it that it just did not work out. So, I think all of that, you know, other people involved and the way the system and process works was quite frustrating.

F6: We sailed through the process, probably highfliers, we had been seen as almost ideal on paper, but then it was dealing with that and all the different bodies and agencies, when it fell apart. I remember us being called to go and talk to someone in the system and it was awful, it was one of the worst

experiences in my life because again we felt, you have messed this up, and you have ruined this.

M6: You felt the blame was on you and this was your fault, so that was very difficult to take.

F6: It shattered our confidence.

The full story of how the treatment and its termination, for whatever reason, were not explored, but what was revealing from the interview was that it had been an exceptionally painful and prolonged experience. The variety of different persons involved in the decision-making process also caused “frustration.” The way it was described as “falling apart” exhibited an unravelling of their hopes as they worked towards the conception of a child. Whatever happened in the interview had caused a rupture in their confidence and there is an interesting blend of seeing the process as problematic and what you were made to feel arising from, “You felt the blame was on you” coupled with the expression, “We felt, you have messed this up, and you have ruined this.” The juxtaposition of these two phrases was held in permanent tension long after the event’s closure. It was of note how M11 described his feelings during the preparations for treatment. “From memory, we got some tests done; we just knew there was maybe something wrong. There were two miscarriages and afterwards I thought I should get tested and I did get tested and actually the finger of blame was pointing at me.” The “finger of blame” was an interesting choice of words revealing that blame as cited here and guilt as cited earlier by M11, had causal connections. M1 too reflected on how “I saw the grief it was causing and at times too felt, a little bit like it was my fault because we knew it was my fault.” Words like guilt, blame and fault are a reminder that for some of the respondents, these were very real and negative emotions.

Such negative feelings of guilt emerge in other studies, thus, confirming the reliability of the findings. As Moulet writes:

It emerges from the recollection of the participants (and this is a recurrent theme) that guilt manifests itself on the individual level through the integration of values surrounding parenthood and particularly motherhood in terms of 'worthiness' on the couple level (for the individual who was diagnosed as infertile) in terms of 'depriving their partner' of this opportunity; and also on the social level, as it affects individual capacities to respond to negative attributions and stigma. (2005, 27)

4.3.1.1.4 Hopelessness

In Proverbs 13:12 the Bible says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick" (NRSV).

Whilst such a biblical observation can apply to life generally, it has for some childless couples a particular resonance as M6 observed: "I suppose it is like feeling bereft, like there is the loss of hope but also just being bereft and also just questioning why? Why us?"

However, it also appears that hope feels as if it can slip away as F2 remarked, "I think we are at the point now where I wouldn't say that we have given up hope completely, but we also realise that it is highly unlikely." This 'hope deferred', turning into a 'hope lost', is reflective of the feelings of many other couples experiencing childlessness.

As hope evaporates, so even can a person's hold on life be significantly challenged as was revealed during the interview with M3 and M4:

F3: But ***** was very good with you, because it was a few weeks later he spoke to you coming out of church, and he said how's things and how are you? and you didn't come home for a couple of hours.

M3: He got it in the neck, I said you don't want to know, and he said I really, really do.

Interviewer: So, what did you say to him then?

M3: I just told him how we felt.

Interviewer: And what was that?

M3: Our loss, you know that we couldn't have kids and I felt, at one point I actually felt, I think I actually even said to him that I felt suicidal.

Interviewer: And why the intense emotion about that?

M3: Because of the loss, because I couldn't have children with my wife.

F3: And I think possibly too because we had gone through the treatment, and we had decided the previous March 2000 that that was it. We had decided that we were not going for any further treatment. The miscarriage was March 2001, that was the end of the road in terms of having a child naturally.

In M3's recollection, the "end of the road" applied to more than the inability for his wife to conceive, but it also portrayed an assumption that life itself was running out of road too. The feelings associated with childlessness can run deep and are diverse. Sometimes the respondents wanted desperately to cling on to the hope of having a child, but equally realised that it had to be tempered in some way, as F14 acknowledged, "I don't know, I always try to prepare myself; I always hope for the best but prepare myself for the worst." Yet, in the moment, looking at her husband, she said, "***** does not like me talking that way."

Whilst the age profile of many of the respondents had negated any prospects of conceiving, the oscillation between hope and resignation was a battle for those still undergoing treatment as was the case of F14. "I always hoped for the best" was measured against her sense of realism; but even again, such recognition was tempered by her husband's disapproval of the apparent negativity. The desire to cling to hope resonates with the findings of Güneri, Kavlak and Göker, when he claimed that "From our findings, it is possible to say that infertile women almost always have hope that the treatment will prove successful, whether before, during, or afterwards" (2019, 32). One study maintained that 40% of its female participants still believed that pregnancy was possible, even after treatment had ceased (Akyuz and Sever 2009). Akyuz and Sever's proposal is supported by F2 when she claimed that "I wouldn't say that we have given up hope completely," even though the treatment was concluded unsuccessfully. The desire to fight against the loss of hope was also demonstrated by F5 when her husband felt compelled to intervene, "We went through six IVF cycles, and I stopped them – because you were ready to go again." Bergart also observed

this strong desire for motherhood, contending that her participants would have continued treatments even after success seemed unlikely (2000). In the case of F5, the desire for motherhood was so strong that the financial cost and discomfort would not diminish her hope, so much so, that the suspension of treatment had to be encouraged by her husband.

Qualitative work carried out by Güneri, Kavlak and Göker also substantiates our findings. In their work, hopelessness comprised of three major themes: the personal, the social or environmental factors and the treatment process. With reference to the individual, a further set of 20 sub-themes were identified. Out of those sub-themes, negative emotions relating to the research consisted of stress, experiencing difficulties, jealousy, negative expectations, anger, grief, intense pain and the feeling of being at the end of the road. Quite significantly, under the heading of social and environmental factors, all three sub-divisions directly correlate to the findings comprising of social withdrawal, social pressure and insufficient social support. With regard to the final category of the treatment process, the fear or anxiety about receiving a negative test result was present during infertility treatment (2019, 24-36). It is not surprising that periods of sadness were one of the responses to not only negative test results but also the arrival of the monthly cycle.

4.3.1.1.5 Sadness

As each respondent narrated their personal journey, they used a variety of adjectives and phrases encapsulating their experiences. For some their journey was marked by sadness.

As F5 remarked:

Our peers, our neighbours, they had family and obviously we did not. ****'s brother by this stage had three children. The neighbours had three with another on the way, and here we were sitting with none and it was easier for me to say, no I don't want a family. I would just say: well, if it happens, it happens. Sure,

we own the shop and we have our holidays and we are very happy. It was easier for me to say that to people then, rather than go into our real sadness.

The word ‘real’ prefixed to sadness once again illustrates the propensity for concealment, and in some cases becomes a blended cocktail of sadness mixed with delight. When M1 was reflecting on parents celebrating their children’s baptism, he concluded that he felt ‘joy’ but also ‘just a wee sadness’ because they had missed out on being able to have such a celebration. M1 experienced delight and disappointment, joy and sadness. Nevertheless, sadness is rarely in isolation as it is often accompanied by guilt. His description of “feel(ing) bad” and “I don’t have the right to be sad” worked as a countercheck to any possibility of nurturing ingratitude.

Sadness can be experienced in other ways too as F12 explained, “I remember at one point when one of my nephews was born and hearing the emotion expressed by my mum, about another grandchild, that kind of thing would have hit me hard. (Interviewer): What do you mean by that? F12: Well, I was happy for them, there was in no way any jealousy, but just sadness, disappointment.”

The emotions of sadness and disappointment are set against the intergenerational backdrop of childlessness where both a preceding and succeeding generation are affected. This potential loss of legacy is recognised in other research findings (Gibb 2019, Zuraida 2010, Hadley 2019), yet it was also acknowledged that where a traumatic or heart-breaking event had occurred that sadness created a shared history and could somewhat lessen the pain as seen here. F2 had been in the audience at a conference and recounting the talk, given by the guest speaker, she said to me:

I don’t know how much you know of her story, but she lost a baby at 6 months and then another one at 6 months. She had two miscarriages in succession and it was just her telling her story [that helped]. I have realised that in talking to

women who are going through infertility or pregnancy loss that the pain is very similar to the pain that I have experienced. And to hear this woman say what she did was just really freeing for me. I had felt sad but felt now that I shouldn't feel as bad, it was really helpful (F2).

There is a tremendous benefit of a shared narrative. It allowed F2 to retain her anonymity, yet fully enter the shared experience of the speaker. The power of resonance and transferability of the experience had a powerful and helpful effect upon the hearer.

4.3.1.1.6 Resentment and Bitterness

Resentment and bitterness were mentioned as characterising the response of those who found that couples with children reminded them of what was absent, as F7 posited, “Yes, I found it very difficult, at times probably resentful, weepy, yeah, I didn't enjoy seeing people with prams or bumps, I found that increasingly difficult.” What F7 revealed was that the struggle to conceive a second child was as intense as the previous desire to conceive. When this second infertility was discovered and disclosed, it did not always meet with an appropriate response.

F7: The most common thing anybody you did confide in would say was, well you have Katie, you know.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel?

F7: Irate probably, not irate actually, but cross.

Interviewer: Why cross?

F7: Because yes, we were and still are very blessed to have Katie, but I suppose I was just that focused on having a family of four.

M7: At that specific time, you are in that term where you want a second child – and it is not happening.

F7: And, if I can have one, why can't I have another one, or why am I not having another one.

In the perception of F7 and M7, the prevailing attitude of those around them suggested that having at least one child should have tempered the strong desire to have a second. What this particular case reveals is that this might not always be the situation, and what it illustrates is that some of the strong feelings like resentment of others with “bumps” and “prams”, are not mitigated with the ‘blessing’ of an already existing child. Feelings of bitterness were expressed by M11 when he responded that “But at times my heart was bitter and envious of other people and it shouldn’t be as a Christian, but I felt envious of other people’s good fortune. Why were they blessed, and we were not?” Similar feelings emerged for F7 when she replied, “I just emotionally struggled. I had one friend who frequently said don’t you worry, I know that someday you will have another wee baby, and I just thought how you can know that you don’t know that. I got a bit bitter about it, I suppose. If we can be good parents to another child, then why is this happening?” Prevalent within these last examples is the idea that those on the other side of the ‘window film’, lacked awareness of the complicated whirlpool of emotions experienced by respondents. One contributing factor to the hurt expressed by participants was the perceived lack of sensitivity shown by others. Comments, jibes and inappropriate appraisals added to the distress of those contending with infertility.

4.3.1.2 Other Factors Associated with Emotional Distress

4.3.1.2.1 Lack of Sensitivity

Privacy may lead to the concealment of childlessness, and this may contextualise the lack of sensitivity. Yet, thirteen out of the fourteen participants in the research experienced inappropriate comments regarding childlessness or secondary infertility. These unguarded comments were often made by my family, friends and those in attendance at church. It did

not appear that respondents were apportioning blame, but their observations were given as a caustic reminder that some people should think before they speak. F2 articulated her case well:

It is not from a place of intentional hurt, a lot of people just don't realise the grief, they don't realise the pain. So, on Monday I met with a couple of ladies from church for Bible study. I was struggling with work and trying to go to one of the normal Bible study groups in the evenings, as opposed to the only other afternoon one, which is a mother's Bible study group. On Monday, the slightly older lady announced that she was pregnant and unexpectedly pregnant; not planned and I found that difficult. It is not that I am not happy for people, but it takes me a little while to adjust, it triggers grief and I just need a bit of time. I didn't say anything for a minute or two and I think she realised that it had caused me to be upset and she apologised. She then said, "I am so sorry, I should have told you more sensitively." The other lady's response was deeply hurtful. Her response was then to tell a story of her niece who is pregnant and how her sister, who can't have any family, was not best pleased about it. But this lady was pleased for her and how she was pleased for this other person in the Bible study too. The kind of underlying sentiment was that I am sorry for the way she [I] reacted, but I am happy for you.

The example given by F2 acknowledges that whilst upset can be unintentional, it also draws attention to the more pronounced insensitivity exhibited by others. The respondent introduced a gradation - at one level the announcement of pregnancy had "caused" her to be upset, but this was differentiated when describing the "older lady's" comments as "deeply hurtful", presumably intentional and designed to induce shame or guilt. F2 also related how at a women's conference, the 'speaker' exhibited a lack of sensitivity by assuming that the majority of attendee's were parents, "It was at the Irish women's conference, the last one I attended. Basically, the first thing the speaker said was, 'Everyone who is a parent put up their hands.' Identifying parents in this very public way not only sought to bring attention to those who were parents, but also by doing so clearly indicated to everyone else, those who were not."

F12 also remarked, “It is a difficult thing when very innocent people ask or hint with the question, ‘When are you going to start your family?’ particularly when you are not ready to share with these people your struggles with fertility. Indeed, F14 introduced a coping mechanism for avoiding honesty.

Interviewer: Do they ask you directly?

F14: Yes. I always shrug it off and say my usual line, Yeah, not yet, not yet but hopefully and then I go on to something else.

M14: That was my line right up until very recently.

F14: And even though we have another family event tomorrow night, all the family will be there...and I will just be telling them the same. There is no way I would be telling them anything different.

M14: We are just taking our time that is my go-to line, just taking our time.

F14: Obviously, as the years go past it is more difficult to palm people off that way. They know we are still young and that we can still use that excuse.

Interviewer: Would you prefer that they didn’t ask the question, or do you not mind the question being asked?

F14: I think it depends on the people who are asking.

Respondent F4 remarked that after losing her child, even well-intentioned comments can at sensitive times be unhelpful. “I was in recovery after delivering the baby and I was feeling sick because they had given me a general anaesthetic and the nurse said, ‘Been there, done that, and got the t-shirt’. I know she meant it kindly, but I thought, your story is not my story and that is what we always must remember. What I went through is different to what other people go through.”

During the interview with F8, she felt that even the language used at times gives women the impression that they are broken or in some way flawed because of infertility and that this can have a dangerous effect on women:

I obviously have had conversations with women who have been [described as infertile] and I am fortunate in that I never felt like I had failed as a woman. However, I know a lot of women who have gone through that process, who desperately wanted children. Women who struggled to have them and felt like they were failing in some way and preventing their partner from having children. Or that they weren't a proper woman because they couldn't carry a baby full term and who really felt like that this was a flaw. I think the last thing people who are struggling with this kind of pain need to hear, are other people saying yeah it is a flaw; there is something wrong with you. That is not what Christ did in the Bible when he met with people who were in pain or whose lives were failing or who had made mistakes. I meet people all the time who have similar issues [to mine], some of whom are desperate for children and whose mental health is being destroyed by the fact that they can't have children and the fact that these things get said so glibly. . . . I wonder if some of those people sat down and listened and respected women more, would they understand more the damage they do with what they say. But by never sitting in the room and listening and engaging and hearing and seeing that pain, they don't seem to appreciate the degree in which their casual dismissal of the issue, or pronouncements on the issue, could really inflict psychological harm on people.

These comments were set within the much larger framework of marriage and procreation, child baptism and the LGBT community within the PCI. Real frustration was expressed during the interview at the extent to which the PCI had been marginalising people with an ever-increasing harshness and clinical separation. This separation, in F8/M8's opinion, seemed to be between those who appeared to be insiders and particularly those who should remain outsiders. It was this context that led to a much wider discussion by F8 and M8 on how the church may be perceived as 'unthinking' and 'insensitive' on some very emotive issues, as M8 observed:

I find it so frustrating, and I see it a lot of the time and it is this lack of any compassion or empathy. People say things that are so trite. I don't believe that my marriage is any less than anyone else's [with reference to not having children]. But it must be really hard if you really felt that you should have children. It must be awful to be made to feel like that, that you really are second-class.

M8 also reflected that it was this lack of empathy that leads to cold and harsh theological statements. When reflecting upon a couple who had multiple still births,

he wondered how they would have felt [those making theological statements] if halfway through that (IVF Treatment) that having children was not really part of God's plan, with the assumption that they are not really a proper family. With M8 declaring, "It must be awful for those people to be treated like that."

F10 also observed, "We had Christians say to us, 'Just pray and believe and it will happen'. There is that sort of blasé approach where you should just pray about it, forget about it and just keep on believing." As indicated by M8 and F10, the correlation of prayer with fertility can appear 'trite' and 'blasé'. Such insensitivity becomes a contributing factor to the hurt experienced.

Finally, F5 and M5 suggested that often the topics of conversation, particularly among females in church, tend to gravitate towards children. M5 commented, "Whenever you are in the 20's/30's age bracket and they are together, all they talk about is what the children have done, what they haven't done, where they have been, what problems they are having, when they are teething." However, F4, reflecting on singleness she said, "For example, if you weren't married and you would like to be and you are in a group like that, I mean it is very alienating . . . I try to take that on board." As F4 remarked, the nature and content of a conversation can have the effect of 'alienating' someone childless or someone single. The net result is that this alienation or unintentional exclusion becomes another contributing factor to the pain experienced by childless couples.

4.3.1.2.2 Exclusion and Avoidance

F2 understood the value of providing various ministries within the church, however, she stressed, "I can see their purpose, but I guess the way the church is structured is that there is something for the children, for the families, for older people and something for the

students. But where do we fit into all of that? We don't." What F2 was concerned about is that whilst the proliferation of various church groups has done much to identify the needs of many, childless couples appear to be a neglected category. F2 went on to explain that this can be an isolating experience:

F2: I found church to be the most stressful place to be in the week because it was a place where I was surrounded by families, surrounded by pregnant people.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel at that point?

F2: I felt excluded. I think because everyone in the church of our age has children, apart from one other couple, and (when someone gets) pregnant everyone is around them like, oh this is exciting.

Interviewer: Did you find you were avoiding people in church who were pregnant?

F2: Yes, very much so and I really struggled with that as I didn't want to (avoid people) and sometimes I felt guilty about that.

As evidenced by the comments already made, childless couples can be excluded from conversations and organised activities, particularly when such activities focus on family life with biological or adopted children. However, when the church celebrates femininity in terms of motherhood, it gravitates towards the celebration of having children as opposed to the blessings of having a mother. When presented or even interpreted like this, the effect is pain and alienation. The Church's celebration of certain days and events was also identified as another contributory factor to the sense of pain and alienation experienced by childless couples as described below.

(a) Mother's Day

When asked about Mother's Day, F2 firmly asserted that she avoided going to church on that day and said, "No I think that that intensifies the hurt . . . I think I feel that stronger in the church than anywhere else. It is the assumption that you will have children . . . yes, I do

feel a lot of grief around at the fact that that is something that I cannot do.” The temptation to want to avoid church on that day is also echoed by M5 and F5. When they were asked about attendance during Mother’s Day services, they replied:

F5: No, I wouldn’t have been there.

Interviewer: Ok, do you think people observed that, but didn’t say anything?

M5: No

F5: I don’t know, I can’t answer that question, I don’t know whether anyone would have been aware of it or not.

M5: Maybe the minister might have picked it up.

F5: I am very aware of things like that because there is another couple in our congregation at the minute and they are childless through no fault of their own and I pick up on things like that. I know I wouldn’t have been there on those occasions and that couple aren’t there on those occasions still.

That type of empathy on how difficult it can be for people on Mother’s Day was mirrored in the interview with couple F3 and M3. He related that he found Mother’s Day more difficult than she did, because it reminded him that he had lost his mother when he was quite young. However, since F3 had adopted children, it has become a little more difficult:

As the years have gone on, occasionally I have found it hard, and probably actually more so since I became a mum. Although we are now parents, I still haven’t forgotten that pain of not being able to have children. So, I still feel that I can stand along with those that are childless, as I know what it is like to be in their shoes and that has not left me completely. Even though I am a parent, there is still a bit of me that has not lost (the feeling) of not having our own birth children, in order to differentiate.

F3 acknowledged that although she has adopted children, the desire to have her own biological children had not left her completely, although by using the words “there is still a bit of me”, she has equally acknowledged that life had moved on. Nevertheless, the experience of childlessness has created an awareness of other people presently contending with infertility.

(b) Christmas Day

Many churches in the United Kingdom hold Christmas Day services with children being an integral part of that celebration. In many churches, children bring their toys to the front of the church and the minister engages with them specifically. It is for the most part a great family celebration. During F12's interview, she remarked that, "I would have found Christmas difficult, I found Church the hardest place to be. I think that is because Church is family and even when you are not consciously comparing yourself to other people in your generation/your age, it is all around you." The 'difficulty' experienced on Christmas Day was also expressed by F4 who, because of the pain associated with it, had temporarily avoided it, she remarked:

I admit that I couldn't go on Christmas morning for a few years... I always go with **** to their service, which is like at 9.00pm. I do this so that I do not feel as if I have avoided Christmas altogether, you know, because it is such an important moment. But the family service on Christmas Day with parents and their children, I found that really hard. I started to go back, it did take me a while and it wasn't as hard as I thought it was going to be. . . . I suppose at Christmas, when there are lots of children about and I find that difficult.

The desire to celebrate Christmas was present for F4, but she found alternative ways to celebrate it without having to attend the 'family service'. The apprehension she had experienced was not realised upon her return, but she found other ways of expressing "such an important moment" in the church calendar. F5 also revealed her resistance to certain days and events:

Baptism services, Christmas services, anything that was very orientated around the family. Crèche, I wouldn't have gone to it to look after other kids, I just tried to avoid family situations, and in many ways that was my choice. Looking back on it now, if I had to do it again, I don't know whether I would have been so secretive, it just seemed to be the easiest way to bear it at that time. I was going through a lot of personal pain.

F6 also admitted avoidance of church celebrations with the comment, “The whole tone of the services... Christmas morning service, I hadn’t been to a Christmas morning service until this Christmas, for I don’t know how many years, was it 20 years?”

The celebration of the Jesus’s birth coupled to the extending of gifts to family and friends was not lost on F6 when she responded that:

Baptisms, Mother’s Day, Christmas Day all of those things are reminders of the absence of children to those who don’t have children... I read many years ago in *The Herald*, I still have the article upstairs, an article written by a girl who was actually a year above me in school. She had gone through similar experiences and summed it up really well. . . . It is Christmas time and there are gifts about, everybody gathered around the tree, and everyone lifts their gifts and there is nothing for you, there is nothing. Everyone else has a gift to open and you have got nothing, and I thought that was a powerful way of describing it. I have said to **** on many occasions, is it something we did? Did we do something wrong? Did we have the wrong attitude? And even though we are not particularly talking about the adoption here, but that was a nightmare, because we were convinced that this is what God wanted for us and we were totally, absolutely convinced. So, when it fell apart, it was like a double bereavement, as we had thought long and prayed hard about it and it was just dreadful. We moved here to this house to raise a family, and this was the emptiest house ever. We got somebody to come out and value the house; I couldn’t bear to be here, empty rooms.

It is not difficult to imagine that a house that seems empty and a celebration that focuses on gifts precipitated her absence at church on Christmas day. When such an attendee is celebrating in Christian theology what is the greatest gift of all, the birth of the Christ child, it must be remembered that even this could exacerbate the already existing pain of childlessness.

(c) Father’s Day

On the one hand M6 recalled a conversation with a minister of a church that brought him some consolation, “I got talking to him and he was a pastor, and we were just chatting and (the minister revealed that) he didn’t have children. He was talking about his church and

his congregation and that he won't provide a Father's Day. Someone had even asked him to come along to take a Father's Day and he said, 'No, I don't do that because of the way it is portrayed.'" In this case, the minister had even refused to attend another church to perform the service on the pretext that it excluded other men:

This is something I don't think we do in PCI. At Church we seem to make a lot of Mother's Day but don't make the same of Father's Day. I have felt this more with having two sons and having gone through the whole adoption process. We need to instil in our children, our boys and in our young men how to be a dad. To be a father is something special, something worthwhile doing and I know in so many children's lives, it's the father who walks out on them or lets them down. I challenged our Parents Association in school a few years ago who always did a Mother's Day shop and I said why you are not doing a Father's Day shop. Now I was the only male member of staff at the time. I asked, "What are you saying to your children, never mind outside of church, in society? What are you saying about fathers, you are making this big deal of Mother's Day why are you not doing the same for Father's Day? What are you saying to your young men?" And one of the members of the Parents Association who has three sons in the school, she went home and told me that thought had really annoyed her, you really made me think. So that year and every year since, they have done a Mother's Day shop and something for Father's Day too.

I remembered in Church feeling the same because we had a big event for Mother's Day and I said, "What you are doing in June for Father's Day?" and it sort of passed over. Maybe other churches do it differently, I don't know.

The semi-structured interview did not naturally lend itself to further discussion on this question, but it might have been interesting to have asked if he would have felt the same if he had not gone through the adoption process. Nevertheless, the point raised was that Father's Day did not appear to attract the same attention as Mother's Day. What I did note was that out of the nine interviews with men present, these two responses were the only ones recorded and having conducted a word search through the MAXQDA software, little or no other reference to an opinion about Father's Day emerged from the data.

The apparent feeling of exclusion, isolation and rupture in social relations expressed by the participants was mirrored in the many blog posts and articles expressing the concern

that ecclesiastical events and attitudes have exasperated their pain (Doragh 2019, Morgan 2013, Day 2019, Hesse 2019, Rine 2019, Lowrie 2019, Breen 2019). Feelings of social alienation and exclusion can lead to avoidance of those situations that further exasperate the loss incurred. As Moulet contends:

Many referred, as well, to the ‘trigger factor’ in interactions with others, explaining that social gatherings were sometimes experienced as ‘painful’ and ‘difficult’ because it touched on their ‘grief’, ‘reminded them’ of their loss and what they were ‘missing out on.’ In some instances, participants even disclosed that they continue to practice selective ‘social avoidance’ in order to distance themselves from these vivid and painful ‘triggers’ and reminders.’ Those who had more recently abandoned their quest for a child described their constant ‘vigilance’ with the topic and their attempts to avoid questioning and to manage (as well as other’s) emotions in ‘normal family settings.’ (2005, 203)

Bhatti et al. identified the avoidance of certain groupings where children are present as being problematic (1999). For some the avoidance of pregnant mothers (Pedro 2015) based on jealousy led to avoidance and according to Mann’s research caused social disruption (2014). Whitford and Gonzalez suggested that inappropriate comments could stimulate fears over disclosure, thus, creating an even greater chance of isolation and withdrawal (1995). Avoiding particular days, celebrations and events as evidenced by the participants confirms Moulet observations that:

Childlessness, too, seems to have left (participants) discouragingly ‘out of step’ with their peers and induced a sense of marginalisation. Their status is experienced as “socially reductive” leaving them feeling like ‘outsiders’ on the margins and excluded from social network... parents are perceived as ‘others,’ distant, non-available, and their conversation makes them feel like outsiders. (2005, 206-207)

One more contributing factor that requires attention is that of ecclesiastical silence. This is so embedded in the experience of church community that respondents long for inclusion, awareness and recognition as part of the support network they seek.

4.3.1.2.3 Ecclesiastical Silence

In the compilation of the interview schedule, I wanted to determine if anyone had heard a sermon related to involuntary childlessness. Most respondents interpreted this to mean a sermon that dealt exclusively with the topic. M1 thought for a moment and answered in the negative, but then related an occasion where a minister had mentioned it in passing. However, it appears from M1's comments, that it might have been better if the minister had not mentioned it at all:

We heard a rather senior Minister; I can't remember the exact wording of it. I can't really remember how it came up, but he was talking about childlessness, and it was just said in a glib manner – "If you don't have family, you don't have those worries, you have time to do this, you have time to do the other." It is the only time I have ever felt that I wanted to walk out of church. Obviously, during vacancy you get lots of different speakers and an old lady met me at the door and shook my hand and said, "Wasn't that a great sermon this morning, wasn't that man wonderful", and I couldn't say anything. I know talking to other friends who went home so hurt that Sunday.

The example does illustrate that not everyone speaking on the subject will do so from an informed viewpoint. It also reveals that parishioners will interpret the subject matter in entirely different ways. F2 also said that she had not heard a direct sermon preached on the subject, but she also remarked, "A few have touched on it in context of other things, just two or three weeks ago, for example, we are working our way through Corinthians, and we were considering marriage, singleness and childlessness. It was quite refreshing that it was even just acknowledged." The occasional reference to biblical passages where women had been childless was recalled by a number of respondents, including M3, F5 and F12. However, outside of those participants, no other respondent remembers hearing any mention of, or sermon directly related to involuntary childlessness.

When it came to establishing if they could recall any resources available to them written by PCI, the responses were almost universally negative, with one exception. F1 did go in search of books at the Faith Mission bookshop, and she was asked if PCI had made her aware of resources that would have been helpful. To this, M1 replied, “Yeah, I suppose at the time, looking back on it now yes it would have helped, we had nothing other than friends and friendship.” F2 also maintained that she was not aware of any material produced by PCI, although she did recall, “The minister did refer me to one booklet, I think, but it wasn’t particularly helpful.” F6 and M6 were the only exception and did remember the book “Coping with Childlessness” and F6 remarked that she still had it upstairs. When asked the question had she found it useful she responded, “I would say not particularly so, since I don’t remember (anything from it). I think if I found it helpful, I would remember more about it.” M11 was not aware of any resources produced by PCI, but he did remark that if such resources had been available:

My minister would have given it to us, he did however recommend a book called “Hannah’s Hope” and it was very good. My wife would have gone online, and we also went to the Faith Mission Bookshop. I know if there had been a PCI resource, he would have said, he would have given it to us, absolutely no doubt about it.

It is impossible to comment on how much the minister may or may not have known about literature produced by the PCI, but I can presume that he was either unaware of it or chose not to provide it. However, of particular note was the question to M3 and F3 on the issue of ministers drawing attention to the subject of involuntary fertility. They maintained that it would be, and it was one of the reasons why they wanted to engage in the discussion to help raise awareness of the subject. F3 began by saying:

Some time ago there was a snippet in the *Presbyterian Herald* about if anyone had gone through infertility and thankfully, we were also involved with the Board of Social Witness. They formed a panel (and we were included). Its remit

was to write leaflets (on the experience of involuntary childlessness) and they never got printed. That was about thirteen years ago... Unfortunately, I don't have copies as I lent them to someone else and they never came back to me.

M3: What we produced, as a small working group, was a document (describing) what it was like for Christians to experience childlessness and our (personal) journeys. A lot of the literature talks about the ethics of IVF and the actual process of what is involved in IVF or ICSI treatment. We had taken a different slant and we wanted to have it like an actual journey. We wanted it to be real to the people (in our) congregations. We wanted some of the congregation to pick it up and identify with what is being written in the text.

F3: There were four different leaflets covering different aspects of the whole (journey). It would have been written in 2006 and we met about five times over a period of months.

M3: It must have been going to publication because we were shown "our journey", which was our reflection including our journey to the hospital and everything. We read it as a group and people were able to critique it, in terms of the dramatics and everything. At that stage, it was with the view of it going to the publishers within Church House.

At this point, both respondents were asked if they were given any reason as to why it had not gone to print. M3 responded that they had enquired and were told that it had "died a death." In conducting this research, I contacted one of the departments responsible for the publication and they admitted that there had been some internal issues at the time. I did not know anything about this document prior to meeting with M3 and F3 and therefore this had not influenced the questions I asked at the interview. However, as important as the reason for it not appearing in print was, the decision not to print, had made a lasting impression. "I felt it was given absolutely next to no importance." M3 then continued with his observation:

I think for me it probably re-emphasised the church (is for) a family and not couples and that they know how to relate to families, they know how to relate to the couples who bring their children for baptism, but not to the people (in the pews) who will never have their own children. They are not interested in relating to them, nor do they know how to. Maybe that sounds harsh, but I think that is how I was left feeling. . . . It confirmed I think that this is not a priority for the church.

This interpretation by M3 does pinpoint the presumed silence of the church in relation to childlessness and the frustration dating back to 2006. This correlates with the material of the Assembly Reports mentioned in the study's introduction. The immediate effect that it had upon this couple (and perhaps others who had also shared their journeys) was to make their experience appear unimportant and, in the words of M3, that the church "was not interested in relating to them." It is one thing being ignored; it is another thing being silenced, but what about the theme of institutional neglect?

4.3.1.2.4 Institutional Neglect

Neglect at the institutional level is a strong word, yet it is difficult to describe it in any other way as exemplified by the conscious decision of the PCI not to print the narratives of those undergoing childlessness in 2006. This would seem to indicate an unfortunate re-arranging of their priorities. At the time of January 2021, there were no resources found on the Presbyterian website or the 'Family Life' webpage signposting people to service provision in the area of infertility or to help couples adjust to family life without children. In addition, the one available document, *Coping with Childlessness*, had not been reprinted. As alluded to in the data analysis section, only two couples out of the fourteen interviewed were even aware that PCI had any printed documentation regarding childlessness. Clearly, this reflects a case of neglect, intended or otherwise, of this group of parishioners by the church.

The paradox experienced by those within the ordained ministry is that they operate at two levels. At one level, they act as personal confidants to their parishioners by demonstrating care, love and compassion; and at the second level, they are policymakers and public figures representing the denomination. This dual role seemed to have created an anomaly in the responses from the interviewees who, while talking about the lack of church

support, they also appeared to differentiate between what they were receiving from their minister/pastoral workers and what they were offered by the institution. For example, F3 and M3 reported experiencing an incredible feeling of disappointment with the denomination in contrast to the compassionate care received from the pastoral worker. M3 described the pastoral worker in glowing terms, “He was brilliant.” F3 echoed her husband’s approval, “In fact, he ended up being our referee for us when we went through the whole adoption process, no, and he was excellent.” This is also mirrored in the experiences of M1 and F1, who said, “We had our Minister at the time they (he and his wife) were really very supportive, listened a lot . . . very, very supportive and we just felt that we could turn to them and sort of lean on them quite a bit; but that is because we had a good relationship with them.” Yet, in all but two of the cases during the interviews, the respondents claimed they were not aware of any denominational support or resources.

In the most obvious cases of M1 and F1 and F3 and M3, they either failed to equate their minister as representing the public body, or if they did, somehow separated him from his personal and public roles. It could be argued that the minister’s failure to address the subject in public through the pulpit only served to heighten the parishioner’s apparent separation between what is publicly acknowledged and the private pastoral engagement. Yet, not all ministers appeared to have the sensitivities required to offer this kind of support previously stated in the data analysis.

For example, M1 had previously felt disquiet regarding a senior minister who had broached the subject of not having children rather inappropriately.¹² Yet when I asked, “Do you think it should be a subject that is tackled from the pulpit, or should it just be avoided?”

¹² The quoted material and conversation are located on page (4.18, Pg205).

his response was, “I think it should be because there are a lot of other issues, we are tackling in the pulpit nowadays that never would have been tackled 10, 15 or 20 years ago.”

Nevertheless, even among couples, there was a somewhat divided opinion as to how helpful sermons would be in dealing with the issue as seen below.

M12: The other thought that occurred to me is that maybe (they don’t) address it from the pulpit because it doesn’t “apply” to the vast majority of the congregation. Maybe there is a fear that by addressing it in a communal environment would open up wounds and not provide the healing and support expected, it may actually exacerbate their difficulties and struggles.

F12: For me, if I was to sit in Church and there was to be a sermon openly talking about that, yes, it would open wounds and it would hurt at the time, but I would be grateful, I would... I would love to hear a sermon, I probably would cry, I never cry, but I would love to hear some sort of something.

Nevertheless, the journey of those impacted by childlessness is not always shrouded in negativity. During the time of childlessness, significant adjustments are made by respondents in seeking to adapt to their circumstances. For many participants the experience of involuntary childlessness cannot be divorced from the reality of spiritual encounter as revealed in the next section.

Every participant wrestled with the confusion and disbelief that childlessness brings, but they remained within the faith community. Undoubtedly, within the denomination, there are those who do not, but I can only recount the stories of those who have, and we must learn from them. Whilst the journey continues to entail a measure of darkness, for many the encounter with God during pain was a stimulant towards dependence on God. The following inclusions will enable PCI to properly acknowledge the courage required of these parishioners on their journey and their commitment to both God and the institution.

4.3.1.3 Spiritual Encounter

In re-living their experiences, some participants confessed that, albeit sometimes reluctantly, they chose to surrender their circumstances to God. Nevertheless, this was not resignation through despair, but rather an active choice based on their perceptions of the sovereignty of God. As F1 succinctly expresses this:

I suppose I wanted the control up until that point. I wanted to be in control of what was happening to me. It was after the miscarriage that I remember sitting in hospital and saying to God, “You have got to be in charge of this, because I cannot do this anymore. I know at that point I felt closeness to him that I hadn’t felt for the past two years. It was just a real sense of; I need to rely on you now.

This trust displayed in adversity was due to the belief in a higher purpose, as F9 remarked, “There is a reason for it, God has his plans, and you have to accept it. I think that is what got us through.” Adding a new layer and placing it within an even larger context, F9 remarked, “He has only one kidney and he never knew that, and it was only discovered (during infertility checks) we would have gone through life not knowing... someday he would have taken ill, whereas now it is periodically checked.” Surrendering to this higher purpose, F5 in her battle against infertility admitted, “I was never physically going to get over all of that, no medicine, no therapy and no surgery was ever going to overcome it. So, the Lord firmly closed my womb, I was never going to have my own children because it was in his plan that we were going to have two (adopted children).” In reflecting upon her life, this respondent had come to a place of acceptance of God’s plan for her family.

The ability of the respondents to see this larger plan and a willingness to embrace it is evident in M5’s observation, “Certain avenues were closing off, but at the same time other doors were opening. However, I think the Lord leaves it up to us to step through it – or not. So that we know it is he who has opened it for us . . . sometimes he opens those doors and at

other times he closes them.” Surrendering to this ‘higher purpose’ is what Presbyterians often refer to as God’s providential care. Sometimes, the doctrine of divine sovereignty is easier to teach than it is to practice. Yet, the authentic struggles coupled with detecting the higher purposes of God were evident in the research. In some cases, as in that of F4, it had a utilitarian value:

I had a relationship with [the congregation], but it was not as close as I would have liked. I see that more now as my working life has developed. I wouldn’t be a pastor and care worker if I had had children and I wouldn’t have probably done the preaching course. I ended up working for the Church, which I felt was a calling and I looked into ministry at one point but realised that wasn’t for me. It makes you realise that God had other plans and those are good things.

Some of those respondents were still hoping to have biological children, such as F10 who remarked, “If God is God, and it is easy for him to make these things work if he wants it to happen.” F2 echoed these same sentiments when she declared, “I think we are at the point now where I wouldn’t say that we have given up hope completely, but we also realise that it is highly unlikely and that ultimately God is in control.” Their hope was evident in their belief that God was able to bring about a pregnancy if indeed He chose to.

As participants revealed their narratives, the sense of a journey was evident. F6 maintained that balancing trial with divine encounter was difficult, nevertheless, “Though there are still the questions why. And that is being polite; I don’t think there is any doubt that we are closer to God.” Sometimes that encounter with God during crisis became an epiphany as well, as M1 comments:

Suddenly faith became so simple, it was at that point we realised that if God you are not in control of this – then this is a real mess. We have no hope whatsoever, and while it hurts, there was, as they say, there was such a closeness to God that we had never felt before. I don’t know how to put it, but suddenly faith in him became so simple. This is all I have to do. I just have to believe that you are in control of this. It was the only way I could cope. It wasn’t so much

anger as it was almost like – a giving in. It was like saying, we have had enough, and we know you are in charge.

M1 is a timely reminder that surrender is not always volitional but can paradoxically lead to clarity and depth in one's spiritual encounter. For those participants, acknowledging the spiritual journey they had been on led to the emergence of images of profound faith, courage, resilience and hope, despite the magnitude of their trials. PCI, by neglecting these narratives, not only silenced those needing to be heard but also robbed the wider church of the thick and rich descriptions of those journeys. When institutional correctives are required, it is important that templates are not constructed by the institution but emerge from those most deeply impacted by the situation which, in this case, is infertility. Another of the research objectives was to ascertain what support from the church should look like or how it could help in order to provide a helpful corrective to prevailing attitudes and practices. Thus, in the next section, the respondents were asked to identify some of the possible means of support.

4.3.1.4 Methods of Support

It was vital that the respondents had an opportunity to highlight how the church could best help. An example of this came out during the interview with F2 while discussing the subject of retreats. A part of her response is recounted here to demonstrate the need for clarity and the danger of pre-understandings and assumptions. This is important when the church begins to facilitate the changes required in dealing with the subject of infertility. So, I was prodding the interviewee about denominational engagement.

Interviewer: What could it start doing?

F2: I think something that is not so much the church congregation, but the wider church. I know organisations like CARE in England have retreats for people

who have had pregnancy loss, something like that may help to provide a safe place where people can go and be in with other people in similar situations, to pray....

Interviewer: You mentioned the words ‘safe place’ which is a common term used for lots of things today in conversations. What would make it safe?

F2: I guess a place where you didn’t feel like you were being judged.

Interviewer: What about expectation?

F2: Yes, that there were no expectations, I guess.

Interviewer: So, you want a safe place, and you want somewhere where your anxieties can be expressed without judgement; where language is the same, you are all speaking the same language.

F2: I think that is something I struggled with, just beginning to know where to talk, like how to express how I am feeling, to talk about all of this because so few people do talk about it. I talk about it a bit more now; I find it easier than I did then.

Interviewer: So even a retreat, which dealt with the biblical perception, what it means to be a fully human, regardless of whether you have a marriage; partner; and family.

F2: Not necessarily wanting to even talk about it, I probably wouldn’t want to do that. I think of a place where I didn’t feel judged.

Reflecting now on the content of the conversation, I realized that I had unintentionally engineered the question to elicit a certain response. Thankfully, the respondent corrected my assumptions and line of questioning. Whatever roadmap for support is constructed by the institution, it cannot transpose its assumptions or programs over the desires expressed by the parishioners. Inadvertently, in my dialogue, at least two theological assumptions were introduced, namely, that what the respondent sought was human completeness and the mechanism they required to achieve it was biblical instruction.

What in fact the respondent had simply requested was a safe place to attend where she would feel free from judgement, a depressurised place where dialogue was not always considered necessary. M12 felt that what he needed was “A safe space, mixing with others

who have the same similar issues.” It is really difficult to imagine where, how and what shape such an environment would take, but this places even more urgency on the PCI and the wider church to work with all interested parties to make sure that what is needed is provided.

In preparation for institutional change, there is no homogenous template that can be superimposed over every geographical region. Rather, ecclesiastical institutions must recognise that localised approaches require contextualisation to produce the most effective responses, even as F4 related from her own experience how one ad hoc meeting organised by her own minister proved tremendously beneficial:

At one point Reverend *****, decided to have a meeting for people and so he made an announcement that if anyone who didn't have children wanted to come along on a Wednesday night, he would talk about the subject. That night, all the women came, he did say men could come too, but only the women arrived. I was interested in the people who were there because there was a lady in our congregation who was blind, and it had never occurred to me that she was someone who had had this experience too. Somebody else who had married a partner with children was there because they had never been able to have children of their own. It was a real mix of people, and it was very validating. It was acknowledging publicly that there are people in this congregation who are in a similar situation, and for the congregation even just to know that that meeting took place was, I thought, a really good thing.

As the respondent remembered that evening, she had clearly benefited from it and though not everyone was in attendance, it was ‘a really good thing’. As this research encourages the church to create a roadmap for change, certain characteristics of that meeting may help nudge the church towards a helpful response. Firstly, though not part of this research project, childlessness is not restricted to married people as the meeting that was convened was open to all, even though it specifically related to childlessness, thereby, eliminating the often-held assumption that childlessness is only about infertility. Sadly, for many single people, the church highlights their lack of marriage partner as their most obvious concern, when for the single person; the desire to have children may even be stronger than

the desire for marriage. Secondly, there is the matter of personal awareness; the respondent had excluded a visually impaired woman from those having to contend with childlessness. This meeting made her confront her assumptions and prejudices, and once challenged, this led to a period of personal growth and development. Thirdly, the blend of individuals who gathered had a validating effect on the respondent. Fourthly, by the calling of such a meeting, public attention was given to an otherwise hidden issue. Such public events may not be appropriate for everyone as they remove the 'privacy film' surrounding such experiences but providing such public forums may have some distinct benefits in breaking the silence, challenging prejudice and providing the whole church with an opportunity of personal growth and awareness. Nevertheless, whilst tackling the subject of infertility may raise public awareness, the church's response should not be limited to this. It also emerged from the findings that the respondents not only wanted public awareness raised, but also for informal networking to occur.

4.3.1.4.1 Informal Networking

Located somewhere between the visible world of public acknowledgment and the protected privacy of parishioners is the community of informal networks. The benefits of experiencing this were clearly stated by F5 as she explored the nature of informal, but intentional, networking:

There was a young couple in the congregation who had a child, but she was having numerous miscarriages and desperately wanted a second child. I knew of an older couple with one child who had experienced numerous stillbirths. This younger couple who had come from a larger congregation where support had been offered thought it would be good to get something started in our wee rural community. I think we met regularly for the most of a year and I got an awful lot out of it because, irrespective of your situation with regard to having children, whatever the loss, we are really all in the same boat and in many ways being able to share those feelings and experiences was absolutely wonderful. It was great, and I got so much out of it. When I think back on it, I think we all

did, but after a year of just sitting chatting to each other, we really had everything talked out. Eventually we had to draw it to an end because there was no one else coming after us.

What the experience of M5 demonstrates is that acknowledgment can be more discreet and still be equally useful. It would be misleading to suggest that this small group evolved organically as they had a focused and structured intentionality. In truth, it was more a semi-structured arrangement of less formalised relationships, but the participants exhibited certain strengths of which the church would do well to take note. The essence of its success was its cohesion, and its solidarity was their shared experience of loss. However, that cohesion was not based on them sharing exactly the same experience, but rather, the fact that it was similar in nature. For example, F5 and M5 had adopted children rather than having biological offspring, whereas another member of the group was contending with secondary infertility. They were individuals “all in the same boat”, but not all sharing encountering the same storm. Ecclesiastical mindsets do not always cope well with informality, and many church activities are programmed for stability. Whereas, what these couples experienced did not require these meetings to continue for it to be considered useful. Nevertheless, M5 and F5 revealed that, in their opinion, the ministers were central for facilitating this type of network, as M5 contends:

I think that the initial contact would have to come through the minister. The minister gets to know a lot more personal things about people. The minister would need to be saying, “Look there is another couple or couples in our church who are experiencing the same sort of thing as you are” and give them the option of meeting in a small group. Hopefully, they would be willing to speak to someone who is going through the same thing. I think that initial redirection or push has to come from the likes of that. Otherwise, I can’t envisage anybody coming up to you in the church saying, “I hear you are childless; would you like to talk to us?” That takes a lot out of the couple who is suffering at that stage.

Whilst such events are not being discounted, one should be careful not to overstate them, as M6 observed, “I would say that if it is something too formal, then for people who

are going through particular things it can smack of – ‘Poor you, we have this little programme for you, you maybe could fit into this’, or ‘Here is a leaflet instead.’ This is better, rather than maybe coming with a preconceived idea. For the want of a better word, this is how I think you need help. It is more about drawing alongside people and trying to understand what they are going through.” The propensity of the church towards structured events needs to be tempered by more informal arrangements.

Respondent F10 was quick to stress that though she herself was childless, that did not give her an automatic right to assume what other childless couples needed, or what they should be provided with. Nevertheless, she maintained that those undergoing the experience where more likely to be in a situation to help:

As helpful as it was to talk to people who understand the feelings that you were going through and that you aren’t isolated and that those feelings are perfectly normal for people to possess, there is an element of you having to deal with this yourself and in your own way. So, I couldn’t give anybody a handbook on how to deal with infertility because everyone deals with things differently. I am not sure that any advice I could give them would be overly helpful. But what I did find very helpful was that when I was talking about how I was feeling that someone else was able to relate to me, as people who have had children don’t necessarily understand. I found that whenever I was talking to my parents, siblings or others who already had children, they may sympathise with you, but they don’t really understand the extent of the feelings or how deep the hurt can be. So, it really was really helpful having the ability to talk freely with somebody going through the same experience.

There is no evidence from the respondents that people with children cannot relate to their challenges, although a shared experience can be a useful asset to understanding. As F10 freely admitted:

I had one friend **** and they hadn’t been able to have children for ten years and then she got pregnant and had two. But whenever I was able to talk to her, she was able to totally understand what I was going through, and I was able to break down and be so emotional with her without feeling like I had to hide anything. Whereas, sometimes I think, even with good friends who haven’t been

on the same journey, you struggle to be that open and that honest, because they just don't understand.

The respondent had not been deterred by the fact that her friend had now conceived naturally and although their outcomes might have been different when seeking to conceive, the fact that they had been exposed to some of the same feelings made her a helpful confidante. If experiencing childlessness increases awareness of the pain or hurt felt by those contending with infertility, what about the respondents' perceptions of the clergy? Did respondents believe that there was a need for greater empathy and awareness on the part of the clergy? The final section will consider that response.

4.3.1.4.2 Greater Pastoral Awareness

The research article in the *Presbyterian Herald* that I had written ignited some interest on the topic of childlessness. In an email response to the article, one respondent wrote, "At last, someone in the Church who is going to look into this issue." This feeling was replicated in a number of responses, like this one: "I share your desire to make the Church aware of how it has inadvertently hurt infertile couples; but yet they could also offer the answer to that hurt and provide more understanding." The ability to alleviate many of the hurts and disappointments associated with involuntary childlessness is probably out of the reach of most churches, nevertheless, they should do all they can to make it a truly shared journey. The church cannot achieve this aspiration if it languishes in ignorance and remains painfully unaware of the struggles of its own childless parishioners. A new awareness is required.

This awareness will be required in at least two areas: at the pastoral level and that of the institution, leading to reform. This research is not suggesting that all ministers have failed in their pastoral commitments. In fact, many respondents commented positively on the

pastoral care and support offered by the local ministers. However, some respondents also felt that increasing clerical awareness was necessary to improve the situation. F4 suggested that:

I would first encourage ministers to be more aware of people in congregations who may be in this category and to be careful of language used in prayers that assume a “family” always includes children. This would apply to single people as well. Also, the church needs to seek ways to allow people to open up and talk about this issue in a safe environment. If the church is there to listen to what we are saying, then that is the most helpful thing of all - to have their infertility experience acknowledged and listened to. There are no easy answers, but to feel validated and have others show compassion for those in a difficult situation is so important. Also, for the church to acknowledge this type of grief is unique, highly personal and private... but [we want] to be listened to in a way that will not feel judgemental. Platitudes do not work. Being alongside people who are suffering is vital. Quiet acknowledgement is the key.

The issues of awareness also troubled F5 and F6 when they stressed that, “We think that the church needs to develop its pastoral awareness of and response to these issues.” It is vital that the voice of those undergoing involuntary childlessness is listened to. Without this pastoral corrective, the affected parishioners will continue to feel isolated, hurt, misunderstood, excluded and silenced. Whilst there was an acknowledgement of pastoral awareness by 48.8% of the forty-three ministers sampled, that leaves an even greater percentage unsure as to what pastoral difficulties or complexities surrounding childlessness might be.

4.3.2 Summary of the Parishioners’ Responses

As respondents narrated their personal journeys, it was clear that their experiences revealed significant heartache and pain, nevertheless, their responses were not devoid of tenacity or human resolve. It is true that participants have experienced a range of negative emotions including grief, anger, guilt, hopelessness, sadness, resentment and bitterness. These emotions were framed within the tense world of concealment and disclosure where

most respondents valued privacy but also desire public acknowledgment. Yet, what they experienced was an expanding sense of exclusion that went far beyond their desire for privacy. Regardless of the participants' non-disclosure, they had experienced a lack of sensitivity from others witnessed by careless comments and unmerited assumptions. A very real sense of exclusion was also experienced during significant events within the church calendar, such as, Mother's Day, Christmas Day and baptisms. Church was perceived of as being family orientated with little or no appreciation on the part of the institution for these couples' sense of alienation and frustration. Whereas, at times minister's pastoral support was deeply appreciated, the participants felt neglected by the institution that they felt was all too silent in regard to their particular experiences.

Nevertheless, in the face of all the challenges that respondents experienced, they showed great commitment to their denomination. Most expressed a depth of trust in God that had emerged as they contended with their infertility, an appreciation of the sovereignty of God was accepted, even when such recognition remained painful and heart-breaking. The fact that each respondent agreed to participate showed a willingness to engage with the church on a journey of greater awareness and support and to being prepared to be part of the solution by providing insights regarding what is needed to understand and support those undergoing involuntary childlessness. However, the question still remains as to what support should look like and what reflections or change in practice needs to occur for genuine progress to be made. However, in considering the experience of childlessness, at least within PCI, it is important that some perspective is drawn from the policy makers and those providing pastoral care within the denomination. Therefore, this research shall consider clerical awareness and response to childlessness, with a particular focus on the act of baptism.

4.4 The Clergy's Survey Data

4.4.1 Clergy's Data

The third objective of the study was to seek to evaluate the perceptions of both clergy and laity with reference to baptism and how this impacts congregational life for those contending with involuntary childlessness. Whilst chronologically the clerical questionnaire predated the in-depth interviews of parishioners, it was not felt necessary to follow that order in my research findings. Therefore, in this section, I will outline the pertinent substance of the purposive sample distributed digitally to the clergy within six presbytery bounds and compare and contrast those findings with the responses made by the participants in the semi-structured interviews. The more detailed discussion of these findings will be undertaken in chapter five.

4.4.2 Context

The apparent sense of alienation experienced by these parents during infant baptism is real. However, it is necessary to establish just how real this is for those engaged in the PCI and who agreed to take part in the research. In the PCI, the clergy operate both as the public face and pastoral conduit of the ecclesiastical systems. Therefore, assessing clerical opinion and practice was critical to providing the backstory to any possible disconnect between the parishioners and the clerical perception and practice. This operated at two levels; first by trying to determine the general perception of childlessness among the clergy surveyed, and secondly, attempting to assess how the baptism of children may impact the feeling of marginalisation experienced by some parishioners. What follows are the responses of the clergy to the short questionnaire administered to them which provide a context within which to examine further some of the responses of the parishioners to their experiences with

childlessness when it comes to their interaction with the church itself and its awareness and handling of the issue.

4.4.3 Clerical Perceptions and Practices

Of the forty-three ordained ministers in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland., twenty-four came from town churches, twelve from city churches and seven from rural congregations. The findings will be presented following the numerical sequence of the items as found on the questionnaire. The clerical findings are also available in (Appendix III: Response to Clerical Survey).

Questions 1: *How many child baptisms have you administered in the last 12 months?*

The total number of baptisms across all regions undertaken by the forty-three-clergy surveyed amounted to one hundred and eighty-four within a twelve-month period. The number of baptisms within PCI has been in gradual decline over recent years. For example, taking a snapshot of a ten-year period, the total number of baptisms conducted in 2007 was one thousand eight hundred and thirty-two that had fallen to one thousand three hundred and thirty in 2017. However, whilst there has been a reduction in the number of baptisms, this is not indicative of the central place it holds in the theology of the church and as is evidenced by the disappointment of parishioners who feel bereft of the opportunity to present a child for baptism.

Question 2: *In general, have these baptisms been celebrated in the presence of the family and invited friends of the participants?* This question helped clarify the community nature of the event. The code of the PCI stipulates, “Baptism shall be administered to those who make a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and to their infant children. It shall be administered in all cases by a minister and, as far as possible, it shall be administered

publicly” (PCI Code 1992, 20). Whilst the code permits exceptions, it was of concern that unless these exceptions are justifiable, ‘home’ baptism is discouraged because of the significance of the covenant community participating in the celebration of the event. All the survey participants who had conducted a baptism had done so in the presence of the congregation.

Question 3: *What passages of Scripture do you read before you administer the act of baptism? Please comment.* As one would expect, the ministers selected appropriate scriptural passages to be read during the baptismal service. The responses to this question would be of significance, and it would help to determine what a minister believes is taking place during the baptismal act. The three most used portions of the Bible read, and in order of popularity, were Acts 2, Matthew 28, and Genesis 17 and are as follows:

Acts 2:37-39: stipulates,³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”³⁸ Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” (NRSV)

Matthew 28:19-20:¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (NRSV)

Genesis 17:1-8: When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous.” ³ Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴ “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.” (NRSV)

It is not surprising that a passage of Scripture denoting the covenant extending to children is placed slightly higher than the passage linking the Great Commission and baptism. Whilst it would be improper to suggest that the majority of the 43 ministers selecting Acts 2 over Matthew 28 would be maintained if a denomination-wide survey were carried out, nevertheless, at least among the forty-three clerics who did respond it is clear evidence that they want to maintain that “this promise is for you, (and) for your children” (NRSV). In keeping with the code of the PCI were the duties and responsibilities of a Presbyterian minister is to administer Word and Sacrament, Matthew 28 confirms the perceived importance of mission and baptism as a fulfilment of that call and responsibility. The covenantal significance of baptism is maintained by reference to Genesis 17 a biblical passage that includes children in the covenant promise made to Abraham by God and as far as many Presbyterians are concerned still applies within those who are his spiritual descendant’s.

Question 4: *When you ask the parents the required vows before baptism are, they sourced from any liturgy, if so, which liturgical form do you use?* Of the ministers surveyed, almost 75% of ministers used the vows contained in the Book of Public Worship, particular to the PCI, whereas 25% chose alternative vows from other Reformed traditions. The theological significance of those vows will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Question 5: *If you have adapted, or created a set of vows that is appropriate to your context, can you include them in the box provided?* This question was asked to allow ministers who had chosen not to use the PCI liturgical formula to include in their submission those revised versions. The disparity in practice and variety of vows is not easily represented here but will be shown and presented in greater detail in Chapter Five.

Question 6: *Do you ask the congregation to make promises in relation to the parent/couple or child baptised?* This question was deemed important because it helped establish if a minister or Kirk Session felt it necessary to include congregational commitment as an essential part of the baptismal service. Five ministers or congregations and four in one particular presbytery did not have any congregational participation in the baptismal service. Those congregations were not required to make promises to God, parents, child or other members of the congregation during the act of baptism.

Question 7: *If so what liturgical form, have you used? And can you include those vows in the comment section below.* As with question five, the objective in asking this question was to determine variation in practice and assess the theological significance of their inclusions.

Question 8 (a): *In the community celebration of Baptism are you aware of any couples, who as a result of involuntary childlessness may find this service difficult?* This question assessed the pastoral awareness of a minister during the act of baptism as to the possible distress that might be causing to childless couples during the act of baptism. In response to question, the survey indicated that 49% of ministers recognised that couples experiencing childlessness could find the act of baptism difficult.

Question 8 (b): *Do you think our teaching on the covenant can be problematic for those experiencing involuntary childlessness? Please Comment.* This question encouraged the clergy to elaborate on any concerns they had regarding the theological position adopted by the PCI. In collating the results, only 14% of ministers surveyed believed that the perception of covenant theology could be difficult for those undergoing involuntary

childlessness, with the majority believing that no such tensions existed between the teaching of covenant theology and those experiencing infertility.

Question 9: *Are there occasions when you have noticed that couples are absent during these services because they are undergoing the specific challenge of involuntary childlessness?*

This question was asked to determine how what percentage of ministers were aware that the pain caused by infertility was so great that it would deter someone from attending an act of public worship. The number of ministers who were aware that parishioners might be absent during a baptismal service amounted to only 17%.

Question 10: *In the last five years, can you remember a specific occasion, that you selected the subject of involuntary childlessness as a sermon topic?* Asking this question helped determined if pastoral awareness of infertility had influenced the priority given to it in the pulpit. In response to the question, only 12% of the ministers remembered having addressed the subject of involuntary childlessness as a distinct topic during the previous five years of their ministries, whereas the remaining 88% acknowledged that they had not addressed the subject.

The significance of the survey was that it helped to provide a basis for theological discussion and liturgical review and will be dealt with comprehensively in chapter five. Nevertheless, it is also clear that awareness exists among ministers that childlessness is a pastoral problem, and that baptism as a community or covenantal act could cause distress among parishioners. The correlation between the act of baptism and parishioners' response was vital for fulfilling one of the research objectives that sought to determine the perceptions of both clergy and laity with reference to baptism and how this impacts congregational life

for those contending with infertility. The participants' responses below would seem to concur with the findings of concern registered by 21% of the ministers in the clerical sample. Whilst the purposive sample helped to establish the presence of concern, it is the lived experience of parishioners that demonstrate just how problematic attending a baptismal service may be as is seen in the next section.

4.4.4 Participants' Responses to Baptism

The reason why parishioners' responses to baptism have been delayed until now is for the following reasons:

1. Infant baptism holds a significant importance within PCI and has been seen as a way of celebrating, promoting and indeed protecting family life. Therefore, giving it separate and more detailed consideration in this section seems an appropriate way of marking its theological and practical importance.
2. The role of clerics in providing baptism cannot be separated from the distress of those affected by its administration. There is an inseparable link between the provision of baptism and the pain of those who feel that it reminds them of the family that they have been denied. To juxtapose clerical perception and practice with that of parishioner response to baptism helps us more clearly compare and contrast those responses.

The research quickly established that just as clerics provide an opportunity for families to celebrate others within their congregation are experiencing something altogether different F1 expressed her discomfort when she said, "baptisms were so painful, and I understand now that it was a real jealousy. I wanted to be where they were, I wanted to have what they had, and I suppose all the couples our age in church were having children at that time." Her husband added a new dimension to the perspective of this jealousy when he described his feelings around the subject of baptism:

There is still a wee bit, we have adopted two boys and we wouldn't change that, but they were 5 and 3 when they came to live with us and sometimes when I see parents coming to Baptism there is a sadness that we never got to nurse children,

we were never up in the middle of the night which is maybe a blessing. We never had that cradling and attachment, we had to build our attachment in a different way with our boys. There is a couple of friends that I work with and they have had children and I have shared this story with them, a lovely girl that I work with came into work with her baby there a few months ago and she is the only member of staff that she said this to, and she said do you want a nurse and I said I would love to, and that is something, we joked about it and sort of longing for the day when we are grandparents, we get to do that, it is just a sadness, it is not a feeling of loss, it is not a jealousy anymore, it is just a kind of a wee bit that we feel we have missed out on...It's funny, for me it depends on, I am a Clerk of Session in **** and I get the joy of presenting a bible to couples when they bring their children for baptism and sometimes when I am doing it my voice chokes because I am happy for them too, I am delighted that they have got this joy, I suppose it is just a wee sadness, and then I feel bad and thing ok I have got so much and God has been so good to us.

F1 was keen to point out that, "I don't think that it was the fact that there is another baby." Rather her jealousy had grown out of the fact that, "I wanted to be where they were, I wanted to have what they had." M1 admitted that, for some time, pain and jealousy had blended in a life of disappointment and that these emotions were both likely to merge and manifest during the act of baptism. When F1 and M1 were asked how important the congregational vow was, F1 responded, "I think it is vital, you are asking the parents to make their vows, but the congregation are also standing with the parents to support them in what they are doing and every time we have a baptism, we are renewing that vow." It appeared from the interview with M1 and F1 that their minister reminded the congregation of their responsibilities. In assessing both the ministerial importance and his own personal significance to the congregational vow, M1 remarked:

****, our Minister at times has taken the opportunity to say to the congregation we would like you to do this, remember the vow you have taken, this is part of it, this is part of what it means to be a covenant family together... I suppose now when I am standing listening to the couples taking that vow, I am thinking of the responsibility I have to towards this child, our young people and children to build a relationship with them, to get to know them, find out how they are doing, and I say I have seen so many of the older couples in our Church who seem to have grasped it, to do that with our children and our young people. I used to say to our couples; we used to take our boys to evening service armed with plasticine, cars and grapes and everything else, and many a night they were the

only two kids there. But the elderly folk who generally turn out on a Sunday night loved to see them and they became like spiritual grandparents to them. I used to say to some of the couples, you don't know what you are missing; you don't know what your kids are missing out on by not coming along on a Sunday night because these people are keeping that vow.

F5 maintained that "If I had known that there was going to be a baptism the following week, I wouldn't have gone to Church." When asked why F5 would have avoided church, she responded, "because they had their child, and I didn't." F6 explained in a little more detail why she attempted to miss most baptismal services:

I just couldn't cope; I would be up at the front of the church, and I just couldn't cope with the emotion of baptism. So, I hadn't been to a baptism for some time; if it was family or someone connected to us, I might have made an extra special effort to go. It doesn't even have to be a special occasion, we were talking about this before you arrived, because there is emotion in every service and baptisms are particularly difficult because you look at people and think why can that not be us? Why did that not happen for us? But even, I was trying to explain to **** the feeling of seeing friends' children, especially whenever they were in their teenage ages, taking part in services and I would sit and think these should be our children, and now it has moved on to nearly grandchildren. When it is this sort of sense of just loss, and remember our Minister speaking about lost hopes, it is this sense of what could have been and of course in your imagination you think of all kinds of things, what would they have been like, schooling, education, careers, the things you would enjoy doing with them, and it just never goes away.

Once again, what Tonkin referred to as an 'absent presence' seems to concur with what F6 so graphically explains. Baptism is the celebration of a new life for some, but for others, it is a continual reminder of a life that never was. However, F6 volunteered to keep the cradle roll and be actively involved in encouraging others to bring forward their children for baptism even though she personally struggled with the sense of loss and would avoid baptismal services, if possible. F10, also when asked about baptism, said that she tried to avoid those particular days but also added, "Yes, I would say there was times when we would have avoided Church and family things. Say it was like a children's day service, we would be like oh, I don't want to go and see other people's children. You know, you would have

avoided those types of activities because they remind you of what you don't have." As F12 stipulated with reference to babies being borne and children being baptised that the experience of pregnancy and baptism seems to be "coming at you all the time." Indeed, these comments were in concurrence with that 'sense of disconnect' that others conveyed during their interviews.

Whilst M11 acknowledged that it was painful to be present at a baptism, he added a slightly different perspective on why he felt some baptisms were more difficult than others. He was better equipped to deal with it when:

I know they are Christians, and they are friends of ours. It still hurts, but I suppose it hurts more if I find out (that the couple presenting their child for baptism) weren't Christians, believe it or not, if that makes any sense. We were doing our best to live Christian lives, we were committed to praying in Jesus' name, we prayed together for a child, going to mid-week, serving the Lord as best we could. Actually, I feel it more now that I am older, and you see younger families having children baptised (who are not Christians), it can still hurt.

At this point M11 seemed to find it difficult to reconcile that people who appeared not to be Christians would have the opportunity to be involved in a baptism service that he had been denied, because of his childlessness. This was particularly painful when it consisted of "our friends at work", who showed no obvious church commitment.

F2 seemed less emotionally challenged during baptism services, but during the interview she reflected as to why that might be the case. "I was thinking about that, why am I not so impacted by baptism. I think that although I was brought up in the Presbyterian Church, and although our church does put emphasis on infant baptism, I always kind of struggled with that. My husband is from a Baptist background so I guess I probably never envisaged that our child would be baptised as an infant." Here F2 seems to be suggesting that

had infant baptism been something that she had believed in and made preparation for, that her feelings might have been different.

Some of the respondents did not have any strong emotional response to the act of baptism. F8 never really mentioned it; M9 explained that they had come from a very small church where baptism was relatively infrequent. M11 and F12 had not really given it much consideration and M3 and F3 did not subscribe to it and preferred and, indeed, presented their adopted children for ‘thanksgiving’ rather than baptism. Interestingly whilst ‘thanksgiving’ is encouraged by some ministers and does appear in the Book of Public Worship (PCI 2016), it is only permitted where the couple makes no profession of faith. When a couple does profess faith; the only option is to have the child baptised. The fact that their children were not baptised is an interesting departure from what is enshrined within the regulations. Most participants expressed discomfort during the baptism services, with only a few exceptions, yet all, without exception, believed the congregational vows to be positive, necessary and helpful.

The literature review revealed a significant gap in material relating to the experiences of parishioners during the act of baptism and this research has helped fill that gap. As each participant revealed the extent of the pain encountered at times, the descriptions failed to encapsulate the facial expressions and tears that filled the room. These narratives had not lost their intensity in the retelling, nor were the experiences located in a distant past, but lived with them very much in the here and now. It seems that on many occasions when a child was brought forward for baptism that the ‘now moment’ was projected into the distance past and the conception that had eluded them, and sadly into a future where the ‘absent presence’ was always going to be, well, just – present.

Feske contends that loneliness and isolation are exacerbated by the church's emphasis on families and that various ministries are organised around meeting their particular needs (2012). Jennings supports this observation of marginalisation by saying that "Many of the woman in [her study] 'reported that infertility made them feel out-of-place when they attended religious services and other activities at church or synagogue'" (2010, 224).

The biocentricity of the church may endorse a coming together of families, but it may not reveal a sense 'of family 'of all those who may gather. The British Council of Churches in a report recognised that, if not careful, the church "can place so great an emphasis on marriage and family life that those who are unmarried or have no children feel themselves to be only second-class members" (Free Church Federal Council, British Council of Churches, 18).

It is clear from the responses made during in-depth interviews that baptism is an event that causes a sense of hurt and alienation. The question remains as to what attendance at church feels like generally for childless couples outside of baptismal services. The research objectives in this thesis were to explore the lived experiences of PCI parishioners contending with involuntary childlessness. However, it is also necessary to examine the extent of that hurt and disconnectedness. Therefore, it will now move away from the clerical perceptions and practices related to baptism with the next chapter considering what it is like to be childless within a church that celebrates the importance of being a covenant community. It is apparent that those feelings are not limited to members of other denominations and are also felt strongly by parishioners within the PCI.

4.5 Summary

It is clear from the responses made during in-depth interviews, that baptism is an event that causes a sense of hurt and alienation. The question remains as to what attendance at church feels like generally for childless couples outside of baptismal services. The research objectives in this thesis were to explore the lived experiences of PCI parishioners contending with involuntary childlessness. However, it is also necessary to examine the extent of that hurt and disconnectedness. Therefore, the discussion will now move from the clerical perceptions and practices related to baptism, with the following chapter considering what it is like to be childless within a church that celebrates the importance of being a covenant community.

Chapter 5: Sacramental and Liturgical Review

5.1 Introduction

So far in this study, I have examined the lived experiences of PCI parishioners dealing with involuntary childlessness, to determine the extent to which hurt, and disconnectedness exist, as well as any associated factors. I have further evaluated the perceptions, both of clergy and laity regarding baptism and what impact such perceptions or practices had on those contending with childlessness. Additional objectives were to determine the level of priority given and the pastoral care provided to PCI parishioners experiencing infertility, and the ways in which they perceived such practices; and, based on the results, to consider theological proposals that would enable theological discussion and good practice. The research used a qualitative approach by distributing a short answer questionnaire to a select group of clergy and conducting more in-depth interviews with parishioners regarding their experience of childlessness. Furthermore, data collected from the parishioners and the clergy was supplemented by information gleaned from a documentary analysis of PCI writings on the topic.

The findings of this study are in concordance with the literature review revealed that infertility is a global problem rupturing social relations, impacting emotions, and alienating people within faith groups and the findings of this study resonated with the findings of the literature review. The introduction sought to present documentation from the PCI officially acknowledging their pastoral concern over childlessness prior to 2006. However, during the in-depth interviews, it emerged that although resources relating to childlessness were developed within the PCI that the printing of these resources had been halted. The actual reasons for the document not going to print were not available, hurt and pain experienced by M3 and F3 who had contributed to the drafting process. Overall, the qualitative research

revealed the PCI parishioners as a result of involuntary infertility were experiencing a significant level of pain and ecclesiastical discomfort. Therefore, in this chapter the interplay between the institution and the parishioners will be examined more closely.

The perceived breakdown in relationship between the institution and those experiencing involuntary childlessness is not insignificant and this rupture in relationship has been intensified during the act of baptism. In this chapter I will consider the result of the clerical questionnaire and its implications for the act of infant baptism. It will be proposed that a revision of the liturgy is required to demonstrate more inclusive covenant communities. Communities not defined by biological parentage, but by covenantal bonds that unite the entire Christian community.

5.2 Baptism and its Impact on Childless Christian Couples

The focal point of family life expressed in many Reformed churches is when a child is brought into the covenant community. The admission of child into the visible church community can be a very emotive occasion for many Christian couples who are childless. In seeking to offer ministers a perspective on how difficult baptism can be, F6 stated:

We have both become weary and our enthusiasm has waned as we feel increasingly isolated. There's a big emphasis on families and, like so many others who experience involuntary childlessness, we do the classic avoidance of Baptisms, Mother's Day and Christmas Day services. I threw myself into children's work as best I could and still do what I can from home but have felt excluded on many occasions. I am not convinced that it is solely due to health problems!

When certain services or other events are being planned and conducted, we have found that childless people and those going through other difficult times can feel excluded and ignored, exacerbating their pain and sense of loss. This may not be deliberate, but rather

due to a lack of awareness or empathy. We may not have lost a child, but we live constantly with the loss of hopes and dreams.

If it is acknowledged that institutional and pastoral awareness needs to be raised on the subject of childlessness, then what about PCI liturgies and practices during baptism, should they too be revised? When the research article appeared in the *Presbyterian Herald*, the ‘covenant’ was mentioned. The very use of the word covenant appeared to upset one reader, so much so, that she sent an email to the research account. In what was a rather long explanation and justification for her position, she wrote:

Ministers do need to be able to be sensitive and compassionate as they seek to give care and direction to couples who desire to have a child and cannot, and equally to single people who would like to marry and have children but have not met 'the right person'. This is putting it bluntly, but it seems to me that raising the issue of covenant theology in this context can do nothing but add to any sense of inferiority that these people might feel. . . . We do not know of Paul having any children of his own. In 1 Timothy chapter 5, he instructs Timothy to treat those in his pastoral care as he would family members: older men as fathers, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers and younger women as sisters. Surely, such pastoring should create an all-inclusive community where everyone, regardless of marital status, parent and childless, feels welcome and can have a role within the church family.

The apparent link between baptism and the covenant making people feel inferior cannot go unnoticed. By inference, it suggests that it divides people rather than creating a truly spiritual and blended family. Any research carried out in the Reformed tradition where infant baptism is practiced must acknowledge the very real sense of isolation parishioners can feel during the act of baptism. However, a more extensive consideration of liturgy and practice is required to determine if PCI, in particular, and the Reformed tradition, in general, are in danger of unnecessarily exacerbating this kind of marginalisation felt by some of its parishioners.

5.3 Liturgical Review

In fulfilment of one of our research objectives, it was necessary to determine from a survey sample the nature of clerical opinion and practice in relation to baptism. This question was asked of the clergy on the short questionnaire to provide an opportunity to evaluate the awareness of individual clergy in respect to involuntary childlessness. This intention was not to consider the mode or subject of baptism, but to find out how it involves the biological parents and me

Members of the congregation, and by inference, how it might impact those parent/s without children. Within the PCI, there appears to be no available literature presenting a clear theology around the importance of including the congregation in the baptismal act. In fact, the surveys indicate a distinct diversity of practice, and in some churches, the congregational vow is omitted. When this occurs, it further reduces sacramental engagement exclusively to the biological parents or guardians. If the PCI want to be an inclusive community, then surely the act of baptism is an opportune moment to express the togetherness of God's family on earth. The question is, should the vows as parent(s) be any different from that of the congregation? If they are, does this not give foundation to the belief that the birth of a child requires more of the parent(s) than it does his or her brothers and sisters in Christ?

Developing more robust vows of congregational inclusion, regardless of gender, marital status, age, and with or without the perceived personal blessing of children, would surely increase awareness of how it takes the whole church to raise a child. Yet, some churches had designated such vows as being peripheral or non-existent considerations as outlined in Chapter four. The concern was to consider what possible effect this could have on congregational life and on the subject of involuntary childlessness.

5.4 Baptism: The Clergy's Perspective

John Barclay, a former Professor of Union Theological College, wrote about baptism within Irish Presbyterianism and summarises PCI's position in the *Book of Public Worship* (1965). He concludes by saying "The third [vow] is made by the congregation, stressing the involvement of the whole people of God in the celebration of the Sacrament" (Barclay 1965, 96). It is deemed appropriate in public worship to require of the congregation the following:

Do you, who now in Christ's name receive this child into the fellowship of the Church, promise, by God's help, so to order your congregational life and witness that he may grow up in the knowledge and love of God and be continuously surrounded by Christian example and influence? (Barclay, 96)

In fact, this position is more strongly worded in the recent 2016 *Book of Public Worship*, written by the Doctrine Committee: Since this child is not yet of an age to speak for himself/herself his/her parents and the Congregation must make promises, so that through Christian nurture, in the grace of God, he/she may come to profess his own faith and serve Christ in the Church and the world.

To be at variance with this practice is to breach the expectation of the denomination. The clergy sample suggests a genuine cause for concern as to why no congregational response is requested or, indeed, required. This omission should also concern the ruling elders as baptism comes under the discipline of the Kirk Session who is also being asked to withdraw from a public declaration of responsibility if no such vow is made.

In discussing the survey sample, it may be helpful to recap on the finding reported in Chapter Four. For the sake of clarity and, brevity and before any detailed discussion, this section will consider one section of the survey under two headings, namely, variations and perceptions before leading into a much larger discussion.

5.5 Variations in Practices and Perceptions

In Question 4, the clergy respondents were asked to indicate which liturgical format they used in presenting vows to the parents. A large number (74.5%) of the ministers used vows from the *Book of Public Worship* (various editions), including the PCI leaflet on baptism.¹³ The 25.5% who chose to use literature from other denominations did so from material within the Reformed tradition.¹⁴ In Question 7, the literature in the vows presented to a congregation are mirrored exactly with that of the parental vows in Question 4 as 74.5 % of ministers used material produced by the PCI.¹⁵

It was a little surprising that ministers and some congregations within the Reformed tradition did not feel it necessary to include the congregants in the promises towards children, thus, intensifying the perceived biocentricity of the parental vows. The ministers were also asked as to how aware they were of the possible pastoral difficulties of those experiencing childlessness as outlined in question 8a of the survey. Almost half (48.8%) of all the respondents from the three regions were aware that childless couples could find a baptism service difficult.¹⁶ There was little in the way of regional variation to this question, except for the rural area, which revealed that only 28.6 % perceived that such a service could be

¹³ Survey question 4: when you ask the person/couple the required vows before baptism are they sourced from any liturgy, if so, which liturgical form do you use?

¹⁴ Most respondents believed their revisions came from URC or Church of Scotland sources.

¹⁵ Survey question number 7: If so what liturgical form, have you used? And can you include those vows in the comments section below.

¹⁶ Survey question number 8a: In the community celebration of baptism are you aware of any couples, who as a result of involuntary childlessness, may find this service difficult?

problematic. However, the survey was not designed to examine or explain the reasons for the regional variation.

The responses to Question 8b were interesting in relation to the theology of the covenant itself being problematic in the perceptions of childlessness as 13.9% of all the respondents believed, at least in the thinking of the congregation, that the covenant could be considered problematic.¹⁷ Whilst such a figure is admittedly small, it is not insignificant as variation in practice will be considered an aberration from an acceptable norm. This was most recently evidenced in the General Assembly's report of 2019, which observed: It was noted in discussion that there appears to be considerable variety in the vows used within PCI at admission to both baptism and full membership. In view of this, the task group asked the General Council to recommend that the General Assembly take steps to clarify the vows to be used at admission to baptism and to full membership. (2019, 23) It was interesting to note that the figure was higher in the town regions, where 25% believed that the covenant presented difficulty for those experiencing childlessness. Consistency was evidenced in the rural regions, where none of the respondents believed that covenant theology caused any issues for any congregant. The smallness of the sample size did not permit any of these results to be generalised, but hopefully, they will create an interesting foundation for any further research required. Nevertheless, it did indicate that, at least, a small number of the clergy acknowledged a certain tension between the doctrine, and its impact on the parishioners.

¹⁷ Survey question 8b: Do you think our teaching on the covenant can be problematic for those experiencing involuntary childlessness?

For Question 9, the respondents were asked to consider if they had been aware of congregants choosing to be absent during a baptism service, and 16.8% admitted to being conscious of this.¹⁸ That figure rose to 20.8% in the towns, and the rural area returned a zero response. The clergy's responses to the survey were indicative of some level of concern regarding baptism as a ritual of inclusion, or possibly of exclusion and, as such, permit the making of tentative comments on the matter. Not only had some ministers exempted themselves from the general Reformed practice, but 50% also believed that childless couples struggled with the service of baptism, with another 25% believing that covenant theology may be a source of discomfort for childless congregants. One clergy respondent from the city was so bold as to declare that "I find 'Presbyterian' teaching on the covenant to be generally unscriptural, having a tendency to discourage the evangelism of children and others and difficult for those wrestling with childlessness." In addition, the towns recorded the highest observation of couples being absent during these services. There is also an admission that no minister had directly addressed the subject of involuntary childlessness within the last five years, although some may have addressed it when it naturally emerged from the exposition of a biblical passage or text.

It would appear, based on the responses of the clergy, that there is cause for concern about a possible connection between not involving the congregation in collective vows and the heightened unease of childless couples at these services. Furthermore, the matter would seem to need further investigation as a failure to embrace the congregational vows unintentionally suggests that the blessing of a child is reserved for the biological parents who take sole responsibility for their spiritual nurture and development. It is not difficult to suggest that the whole congregation, including childless couples, would be marginalised by this experience. Add to this an on-going reticence by the clergy to speak publicly about

¹⁸ Are there occasions when you have noticed that couples are absent during these services because they are undergoing the specific challenge of involuntary childlessness?

involuntary childlessness and one can understand how the silence perpetuates the feelings of exclusion, albeit unintentionally. Further research would be required among the ministers to determine why such hesitancy exists among them to address the issue of childlessness as a distinct subject requiring separate attention, particularly if those same ministers are willing to address other sensitive issues. This gives rise to several questions like: Is their reluctance to address it as a separate subject due in part to the sensitive nature of the material? Have they avoided the topic because it is considered too personal and emotive to address as a sermon topic? Is there a feeling that individual clergy lacks the theological competence to treat this subject with the quality and insights required to bring information and comfort to those facing infertility as a very real challenge? Or would the ministers be transparently honest and admit that the pastoral problems associated with childlessness do not appear to concern many people within their congregation and that other subjects must be given a higher priority? It would then be interesting to compare these findings with a set of further questions, such as, have the same ministers within the town regions addressed the subject of human sexuality as a separate one within the last five years? If they have, then why was this considered to be of greater significance from a pastoral perspective? Nevertheless, some of the comments about the practice of baptism, covenant, and the nature of the church produced seedlings of thought that could reap a much greater harvest of theological inquiry.

5.6 Towards a Greater Inclusiveness

The data for Question 8a does suggest that a significant number of the clergy regarded involuntary childlessness as painful, at least, to some of their congregants and this raises theological questions regarding ecclesiology and pastoral care. However, the PCI recognises the importance of pastoral care to those who experience involuntary childlessness and have made resources available to them (PCI 1999). In an attempt to broaden congregational

perspective on the nature and practical application of the covenants, it produced a Bible study course entitled *Closer to Home*. The document was helpful because it outlined the nature of the covenant under various headings. Therefore, long before it arrived at the family as a biological unit, it had considered many other significantly related areas of covenant theology. However, reference to the covenant family of the church is still underdeveloped, though significantly, it is mentioned on page 24 of the booklet. Equally important is a reference in the comments section of the questionnaire to the covenant family being the community of faith and the importance of congregational engagement. As one respondent remarked with reference to Question 8a:

Yes. It probably is difficult for those who would like to be parents but haven't had the opportunity. When properly understood, the opposite should be true. Our covenant teaching should mean that people who aren't parents have the opportunity and responsibility to be involved in the lives of children within the family of God" (city church). Another respondent also recognised the difficulties experienced during baptism and stated.

This could be a real struggle for some people, I'm sure. Add to that single people who feel 'incomplete' because they have not found a husband or wife. I think this can be sensitively addressed through emphasising our understanding of a covenant community, where all believers have a love for and responsibility towards the generations that follow. (Town church)

The importance of moving it away from the perception of biocentricity is also recognised, as illustrated by two different responses by ministers in town churches. The first said, "As the focus is on the family of believers, connected by faith in Jesus, not genealogical blood line." The second respondent noted, "Membership of the covenant community is not dependent upon the bearing of children. Our identity as covenant people is not found in our children, but in Christ." Both respondents here acknowledged that the Church, as a covenant

community of believers, should be emphasised, based upon their relationship in Christ as opposed to their biological connections.

These observations highlight two elements. The first is the sensitive nature of the issue under consideration, and the second is the significance of the covenant community and not just the covenant child. I would suggest that this was very much appreciated by all the ministers who engaged in the survey, and only a small amount of work would be needed to emphasize the role of the covenant community in the baptism of a child. However, what may be more problematic is defining what that role should be. To some extent, this became more apparent when considering the vows the congregation should take which are more challenging than those taken by the parent(s). There is almost universal acceptance of the two elements to the vows that parents must take. The first centres on their personal faith in Christ, and the second, relates to the responsibility of providing a Christian witness. In essence, the promises made by the parent(s) and congregation are essentially the same as seen below:

To the parents:

In presenting this child for Baptism, do you profess your faith in God as your Creator and Father, in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, and in the Holy Spirit as your Sanctifier and Guide?

The Response: I do.

Will you, by God's help, provide a Christian home, and bring up this child in the worship and teaching of the Church, so that he/she may come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour?

The response: I will.

To the congregation:

Do you who now in Christ's name receive this child into the fellowship of the Church, promise, with God's help, so to order your congregational life and witness that he/she may grow up in the knowledge and love of God and be continuously surrounded by Christian example and influence?

The response: We do.

This is effectively a repeat of the 1965 *Book of Public Worship*. However, in that edition prefacing the vows to parents, the congregation is reminded of the parents' responsibility:

It is the duty of those who present their children for baptism to profess their faith in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and promise to bring them up in the faith, in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and in the ways of the Church of God.

The word *nurture* is removed from the responsibilities outlined to the congregation:¹⁹

Do you, who now in Christ's name, receive this child into the fellowship of the Church, promise, by God's help, so to order your congregational life and witness that he may grow up in the knowledge and love of God and be continuously surrounded by Christian example and influence?

However, preceding the vows in the 2016 *Book of Public Worship* is the statement:

Since this child is not yet of an age to speak for himself/herself his/her parents and the congregation must make promises, so that through Christian nurture, in the grace of God, he/she may come to profess his own faith and serve Christ in the church and the world.

Whilst this rightly acknowledges that the nurturing is to be done by both the parent(s) and congregation, the word *nurture* does not make it into both sets of vows for parent(s) and congregation. I think, following Calvin's analogy with the church as mother and his reference to it acting like a "womb," it might have given the more maternal role to both parent(s) and congregation (Grand Rapids, MI; Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002, 33). Nothing would have been lost with its inclusion, and, quite possibly, something would be gained by vocalising shared responsibilities.

¹⁹ In 1982 an experimental revision of the Book of Public Worship was printed, the congregational promise was, "Do you promise, by the grace of God, so to live in the faith of the Gospel, and in love for one another, that this child and all others among you, may grow up to love and serve our Lord Jesus Christ. It seems that the current version of the Book of Public Worship has chosen to omit the relational aspects of loving each other and the witness and relationship extending to other children. (Revised edition section 4, Pg. 5)

These two responsibilities, one of nurturing and the other of providing a Christian example, are not mutually exclusive, and they are to some extent inextricably linked. Yet, when considering the submissions given by respondents in the questionnaire, a diversity of opinion exists among the 25% who have chosen to use other congregational vows at baptism. For example, one minister stated that whilst he followed the PCI liturgical format for the parent(s), when addressing the congregation, he simply asked the congregation to stand as a sign that they were prepared to support the family as they sought to bring their child/children up within the family of God (town church). Another town church chose the wording, “In recognition of our responsibility to play our part, in praying for and teaching this child the ways of Jesus—will the congregation please stand” and in doing so, extended the congregational involvement a little further still. Whereas other churches required more of the congregation by asking them, “Do you promise, by the grace of God, so to live in the faith of the Gospel and in love for one another that this child and all others among you, may grow up to love and serve our Lord Jesus Christ?” (City church). A similar vow is expressed by another city church with the following wording: “This sacrament lays solemn obligation upon us as the people of God. Will you be faithful to your calling as members of the Church of Jesus Christ, so that this child and all other children in our midst may grow up in the knowledge and love of Christ?” The variations continued with a city minister addressing the congregation with the following declaration and subsequent vow:

Declaration to the congregation:

You who are gathered here represent the whole church. The word and sacrament bring you the joy of Christ’s presence in your midst. They also bring you responsibilities as Christ’s people in this place.

Question to the congregation:

Do you welcome _____, and do you renew your commitment with God’s help to live before all God’s children in Christian faith and lifestyle?

One respondent had eventually taken a declaration made to the congregation and now included it in the baptismal vow:

Do you as a congregation promise to support x and his/her family, to nurture x with love and pastoral care until such time as he/she processes Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord?

What at least two of these comments do is reveal a desire to see the congregation and parent(s) share a responsibility not only to provide an example of Christian lifestyle, but also to incorporate a language more readily identified with nurturing. For example, the two variations include the word *love*, and one introduced the term *pastoral care*. I think these are positive developments in terms of the appropriate terminology required. However, providing the more inclusive language for congregants has also introduced, perhaps inadvertently, a degree of ambiguity. For example, the 2016 *Public Book of Worship* used by the PCI includes a liturgy for a service of thanksgiving. This service is provided for those who feel unable to take the covenantal vows of baptism. As parent(s) they have, for whatever reason, felt unable to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Hence, it would be assumed from a Reformed position that their children are not in that covenantal relationship with God, at least not yet. The distinction between the children is affirmed with the declaration that is made to the congregation with altered wording. In the case of a covenant child, they are recognised into the fellowship of the church. However, in the Service of Thanksgiving, the declaration made to the congregation notes that the child can lay claim to our prayers and support, and that any such declaration must welcome them as Jesus welcomed children. The distinction being drawn between covenant children and those still outside the covenant is publicly acknowledged.

Addressing the Congregation, the minister says:

Do you undertake to provide for this child, instruction in the gospel of God's grace, the example of Christian faith and character, and the strong support of the family of God in prayer and love?

Essentially, both vows speak of bringing the child up in the knowledge of God's love or grace and setting them an example of Christian witness. However, the declaration clearly states that the church's relationship with child and his or her parent(s) is different. One has been born into the covenantal family and the other child remains, at present, outside it. The question is, should the language of the vows not reflect that? The responsibility toward all children is evidenced by the desire within PCI to have a Service of Thanksgiving, and that is commendable, yet even in some of the PCI revisions used by individual ministers, the distinctions between children of the covenant and others are being blurred. For example, in one of the liturgical revisions, the PCI minister inquires of the congregation, "Will you be faithful to your calling as members of the Church of Jesus Christ, so that this child and all other children in our midst may grow up in the knowledge and love of Christ?" In this variation away from the PCI liturgy, the minister has involved children traditionally understood to be *outside the covenant* in the promise made to a covenant child. This creates a level of ambiguity at the congregational level, where the congregation is left to assume that the relationship of covenant and non-covenantal children to the church and, therefore, to professing believers is the same. It could be argued that since it is the visible churches that are taking the congregational vow, including those who make no profession of faith, ambiguities will always exist. Nevertheless, a conversation needs to take place because if it is presumed that one child is a member of the visible church, and the other is not. How then is that reflected in the vows?

5.7 Moving Away from Biocentricity

After considering the data from the questionnaire, the research findings would suggest that the following observations are necessary and will be of benefit to all those within the Reformed tradition. The fact that some ministers have marginalised the congregations from taking responsibility for children at baptism or thanksgiving is lamentable. As such, it focuses attention on baptism as a biocentric act for individuals and not as a covenant act to be enjoyed by the whole Christian family. Unfortunately, this may reinforce an all too prevalent individualism, which has a profound effect on ecclesiology and will be considered later in this chapter. Horton contends that:

Infant baptism, therefore, is not incidental but essential for a covenantal ecclesiology. It is integral not only to the continuity of the covenant through Old and New Testaments but also to a conception of the church as the *place* where faith is born and fed as well as the *people* who exhibit it. The inclusion of believers' children underscores the priority of God's sovereign grace in ecclesiology as well as soteriology, challenging all voluntaristic and contractual interpretations that contribute to an individualistic faith and practice. When construed in the context of a covenantal theology, the baptism of believers together with their children underscores (1) the priority of divine activity in creating the church (i.e., covenant over contract); (2) the "mixed" character of the body of Christ at present, which subverts over-realized eschatologies; (3) the importance of personal faith as well as communal mediation in the nurture of faith and repentance. (Horton 2008, 187)

A less individualistic understanding of ecclesiology is required to negate the congregational vows. The church must at least foster the spirit of what Gibran meant when he wrote, "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They came through you but not from you and though they are with you, yet they belong not to you" (Paul, Margaret. 2014). Whilst the economist, Nancy Folbre (1994), argued albeit for entirely different reasons that children should be a public good, the emphasis is sound that children are essentially a community experience and not solely a parental one. It is possible to reinterpret what Gibran has observed and conclude that

covenantal children do not belong to parents but to God, and that they are a gift not just to parents but to the community as well. Pence cites the work of Anderson and Foley and writes:

Incorporation of the new-born into the Church community qualifies the parent's "ownership" of their child because already, in baptism, the new-born is declared to be a citizen of a larger community that transcends family, the parents, siblings, and grandparents who are already confronted with their child's (and their own!) right to identity as individual human beings. Baptism may serve, then, as a powerful ritual defence against any family enmeshment that will inevitably stifle the differentiation and individuation of, not only the new-born, but also of all family members. The theology of baptism can and should reflect this family system's view of the significance of the rite. (Pence, 9) The relational changes are also recognised by Jensen who says that "Baptism thereby gives Christians and new mothers and fathers, as well as new sisters and brothers who are equal, none favoured or advantaged over the others." (Jensen 2012, 58). Whilst I may not agree entirely with what Marsh contends, his emphasis on the church acting as guarantor does raise the profile of the congregant to that of co-participator in baptism and beyond the role of being simply a spectator or an understated participation. He argues that:

It must be emphasized that the Church in question here is the local Christian community in whose name the baptismal ceremony is taking place. The gathering which has come together to celebrate the sacrament represents the local Church: it is the local Church in sacramental action. In accepting the infant, the (local) Church thus takes it over, attaches it to itself as a member and supplies its own faith and response for that of the child. In so doing, the local Christian community takes Christian responsibility for the child and goes guarantor before God for its faith and the development of that faith. Belonging to the community of faith which the Church is, the infant is from now on nourished by the faith of the community and gradually comes to make the response of faith given by the Church in its name its own. The problem of the response of faith in infant baptism must thus be understood in the light of the infant's condition and the responsibility in its regard undertaken by the (local) Church and guaranteed by it. On these grounds, infant baptism reveals itself as

a mutual communication in Christ between the revealing God and the responsive man, even though the infant's response is as yet by proxy and is only gradually mediated to it and elicited from it as it develops in the faith of the Church in its local Christian community (Marsh, 8–9).

As Jensen contends, “Unlike the first birth, the second birth is a matter of conscious choice. Moreover, the offspring who emerge from a baptismal font share a single father and mother. They receive a new name and are siblings within a single ‘new birth’ family” (Jensen, 57).

5.8 Developing a Theology of Togetherness

It is one thing to marginalise the entire congregation, and perhaps that is fairly easy to rectify. What is more problematic and needs much further pastoral and theological consideration is how must single or childless parent(s) be included in the baptismal service that effectively acknowledges their family status within the covenant community? It has been recognised that the act of baptism potentially causes hurt and pain to childless couples. If that is the case, it is up to the church to find out why. If pastoral care is central to the nurturing of all God’s children, then has the Church effectively developed a covenant theology that emphasises, not simply the position of the child to the covenant, but the relationship of human beings to one another as a result of the covenant? The difficulty with an act of baptism that is centred on the parent(s) and the child gives the impression that such a couple has been blessed with a child and is the recipient of a promise, rather than the community, who essentially is the recipient of such a covenant promise. This biological couple is not complete as a result of God’s faithfulness, but potentially the community is being blessed in a true act of spiritual procreation. When a misapplication of covenant theology inadvertently suggests that domestic completeness is the intention of God by providing children as a biological inheritance, this will only further alienate those who remain childless. As one of the clergy in

the questionnaire remarked, “It’s not that our teaching is problematic, but certain people’s outworking can be. There can be a feeling of ‘you’ve no kids, you’re not complete.’ I think our teaching on family, singleness, and completeness is lacking, never mind covenant.” The findings of this research resonate with such a comment and show the necessity to work toward a theology of inclusion that seeks to harmonise singleness and childlessness without stigma, silence, or inference that true completeness is best evidenced in marriage or procreation.

In seeking to address this issue of the alienation felt in congregational life in general, and in the case of baptism in particular, it may be necessary to re-examine what is often believed the Bible proports to teach about marriage, children, and infertility. The seminal work undertaken by Moss and Baden is controversial and challenges traditional assumptions regarding the biblical material connected to barrenness. To summarise briefly, they contend that the injunction to go forth and multiply and subdue the earth was time specific and no longer applies to individuals today in that it moved from biological parenthood to nationhood expressed through the Abrahamic covenant, which was the final injunction regarding the necessity of procreation. The biological command has essentially been replaced with a spiritual equivalent and that there is a comparison between Eden before the fall and the existence of children and heaven. When Adam was created and God saw that he was incomplete, that it was not good for him to be alone, he created Eve. Then God saw that everything was good. The addition of children was not to complete the relationship between Adam and Eve, but essentially to populate the earth until such times as the earth was populated. Potentially, at least, human completeness is not defined by marriage or children but by a spiritual bond and life within the family of God. The church, therefore, reflects, with

eschatological significance, heaven, where the requirements of marriage and procreation are redundant. In a controversial and bold passage, they conclude:

The remarkable aspect of the elevation of infertility is not that it stands apart from other disabilities, but rather that it stands as a part of the tableau of heavenly perfection. Barrenness is not the exception to the rule; it is the new rule. It is not the new normal, it is the heavenly ideal. Perhaps here the reflection of heavenly realities sheds light onto earthly ones. (228)

I will examine Moss and Baden's comments in detail later in the chapter, but such a hypothesis helps us see that the emphasis is not on the importance of children born into the covenant but on the covenant extending not only to the children of parents but also to everyone the Lord our God calls. The focus at baptism, whilst appreciating the blessing of a child born to its physical parents, must not confuse this celebration with the primary intent of such a covenant. It may apply to the children primarily because God will not exclude them. The purpose of the covenant is to draw together all those the Lord shall call from every tribe and nation and how children born into that community can effectively be part of that process as well as those adopted or engrafted as adults. The proposal arising from this research is that congregational vows should become an integral part of the baptism ceremony of every church.

As a result, the denomination may be encouraged to develop a more robust understanding of the nature of the covenantal relationship that exists between the congregation, child, and parents, and how this differs from those still outside the covenant. Perhaps, greater work needs to be undertaken to consider how the covenant family could meaningfully become co-participants in nurturing the child within the womb of the church. Maybe, consideration should be given to a declaration regarding the nature of a covenant community and our relationships to one another and the child, like that of marriage, that may be of benefit in clarifying and heightening the significance of what is taking place.

As the survey of ministers indicated, a significant percentage of ministers recognised that infant baptism had the potential to alienate and marginalise those experiencing involuntary childlessness. Yet, a few ministers have addressed this issue, and if biocentricity exists within many churches, the pain of involuntary childlessness will continue to be ignored and perpetuated. Ecclesiastical institutions are required to recognise their responsibility to all members of the church and to provide a forum for further discussion in which the Reformed churches could explore how infant baptism can be developed to establish a genuine sense of family beyond that of the biological parents. If the covenant community is to be a truly inclusive one, it must recognise the alienation expressed during the in-depth interviews of church members experiencing infertility as a very real problem, which will require a new liturgy and a more sensitive ritual surrounding the act of infant baptism. As it currently stands, both the current liturgy and the focus on biocentricity exacerbate that sense of isolation and hurt experienced by the parishioners. Although theological reflection and a revised ecclesiology may dilute some of the biological centrality attached to baptism, but a revised liturgy framing the congregational response may do much to provide a greater sense of inclusion. The Doctrine Committees of the Reformed churches may have to decide what this should look like; nevertheless, the congregational vow at baptism could be revised to more appropriately reflect the status and responsibilities of all believers towards those who are perceived as covenant children. However, I was in the process of formulating vows that would reflect the findings of this thesis, when PCI released their own reformulated congregational vows which state:

As we receive (name) into the fellowship of the Church, do you promise with God's help, to be faithful in prayer, spiritual nurture, Christian example and influence, for him/her and his/her family. (2020, 94)

I commend the doctrine committee for its re-inclusion of ‘spiritual nurture’ as a distinct responsibility of the congregation. However, the perceived drift in PCI is towards a biocentric understanding of baptism was revealed in the congregation acting as a support mechanism for the domestic unit. Hence, for the first time in PCI history, the congregation has been called upon to officially ‘vow’ or commit themselves to a child’s family as well. One might expect that this is a responsibility of the congregation, but to formalise such an arrangement or expectation, whilst not vowing to support others who face equally challenging life situations is pastorally, theologically and insensitively short-sighted. This research concludes that any vow must reflect the response that Christian siblings would make as they seek to support one another in the family of God. This is best demonstrated within the covenant community when time-bound biological distinctions are eschatologically dissolved. Such a shift in emphasis encourages a truly spiritually blended family that demonstrates an equality of love and commitment that reaches far beyond biological parenthood. The prototype and suggested congregational vow in the next section is an attempt to give better expression to the word ‘nurture’. If a congregation is expected to nurture; then on what grounds is it expected to do so? Surely it is insufficient to state that we do so as those seeking to ‘support’ the biological family, but rather, as an eschatological community our love, commitment and nurture should potentially even transcend that of natural kinship.

5.9 Prototype of a vow

Declaration to the Congregation:

Today we are grateful that God has blessed our community with the birth of (name) and that once again God has demonstrated love and grace by adding (name) into the fellowship of the Church.

Congregational Vow:

As we receive (name) into the fellowship of the Church, do you promise with God's help, to be a loving family to (name), and as brothers and sisters together to spiritually nurture, love and care for him/her as family members. Do you with God's help promise to provide a Christian example and influence that is consistent with being a disciple of Christ?

Whilst the focus remains tightly defined in terms of offering support to the biological or domestic family unit; it belies or may even be symptomatic of a much wider lack of liturgical support for those who suffer from infertility or pregnancy loss. However, this lack of support is not confined to PCI as Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue, remarked that:

The absence of formal liturgies to respond to the needs of couples struggling with infertility or for those who find themselves in the painful reality of making decisions involving the termination of pregnancy requires a deeply sensitive reflection and engagement from churches to respond in a pastorally helpful way, acknowledging the associated theological, pastoral, and ethical complexities. (Nuzum, Meaney and O' Donoghue 2019, 140)

Nuzum, Meaney and O'Donoghue, believe there is a lack of discourse and provision acknowledging pregnancy loss within the churches (2019, 1). Walton contends that as the church learns to deal with infertility it will "require new rituals, new pedagogies, new ways of preaching and caring to be created which can contemplate the horrors we can no longer afford to ignore" (Walton 2001, 10). This may require many things, but within the parameters of PCI, it will require a theological shift.

5.10 Sacramental Theological Review

After considering the experiences of the PCI parishioners, it would seem that the PCI is definitely family-centered, and that whilst the act of communion celebrates the unity

brought about by Christ in a shared meal, the pain felt by some parishioners during baptism, is only fuelled by PCI's excessive biocentric emphasis, will only perpetuate feelings of isolation and exclusion. According to F8/M8, what lay behind the renewed emphasis on marriage and procreation was a conflict with members of the LBGT community. If the perceptions of F8/M8 are correct, it is somewhat regretful that the pastoral concerns towards those struggling with sexual identity dissolved into a dispute about infant baptism, credible faith, and the means of visible entry of a child into the church.

Of interest in this discussion were the two draft consultation papers for the presbytery's consideration as of March 2020, which are still under Presbytery review as of January 2021. These documents are entitled, *Credible Profession of faith and Admission to the Sacraments: A Framework for Discussion for Kirk Session and Guidelines for Pastoral Care of Same-Sex Attracted People and Their Families*, the second of the documents is entitled, *A Biblical Framework and Pastoral Care Guidelines for People Who Struggle with Gender Identity, and Their Families* (PCI 2020). The first of these booklets highlights both an ongoing concern as well as a new opportunity for three reasons:

1. It reinforces Stewart's concern that the ebb and flow of grace is alternating very quickly within PCI. The original pastoral concern of 2006-7 clarifying how pastoral care should be provided to those with same-sex attraction (grace) ebbed away during the debate with the Church of Scotland over same-sex relationships which led to a parting of the ways (2017-18). However, this ebb in grace is now going through a partial corrective by producing practical pastoral guidelines facilitating the care of same-sex attracted people and their families, hence, the 2020 Presbytery consultation document included in 2021 annual report brings PCI to an interesting point in the ebb and flow of grace.
2. A tension in eschatology is revealed between the protological framework of creation and the eschatological anticipation and realization of the 'new creation'. For example, in the first of the 2020 documents under the description 'Biblical Foundations', the writer surmises that "In God's creation design, the covenant he made with human beings could only be fulfilled as they would become fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth, and subdue (or govern) it (Genesis 1). Child-bearing was part of God's perfect original design and

covenant in the one-man, one-woman relationship he created” (PCI 2020, 16). This protological position is once again affirmed as it has been before in other PCI reports. Yet a more positive emphasis, this time to eschatology, is referenced in point four under ‘Biblical Foundations’ where the author writes, “There will be no human marriage in heaven because the perfect relationship towards which it points will have come to be. That is, the union between Christ the groom with his bride, the church. Not even the best of human relationships comes close to that one. All we have here, even sexual fulfilment, is just a shadow of what we will have in eternity” (PCI 2020, 18). This indeed is a promising starting point for churches that have become all too preoccupied with sexual identity, and all too often focused on domestic families in gathered worship. However, under pressure to defend what it believes to be a biblical sexual identity, the denomination can quite easily retract into negativity, defining and using marriage and procreation as a weapon against a threat of heterodoxy, when this occurs a lack of grace, or tolerance, may seem apparent. This has been now recognised, at least in principle, by the latest General Assembly report of 2019 when it declared in point (d) page 20, “(we) need to promote what we believe and why we believe it. Danger of agenda being set by others, e.g., the need to promote marriage as a positive thing rather than simply react to other agenda regarding a redefinition” (2019). The PCI cannot let the circumstances of confrontation define its eschatology and ecclesiology; rather eschatology must reshape and define the Church. To decrease the potential of this happening, a more comprehensive eschatology that impacts on how we understand the church will have a more stable influence on its members than reactive policies and pronouncements.

3. The first of these documents takes another step forward in pastoral care by introducing ten helpful reminders as to how to provide pastoral care to those experiencing same-sex attractions. It quite rightfully places it under the heading, *The Church Being the Church* (2020, 24). By summarising four of these points, the current pastoral concern shown to same sex attracted couples could provide a healthier church environment for those experiencing childlessness. The first point under subheading (a) “address sympathetically in services and teaching the struggles involved for individuals and families.” This openness and resolve to address the issue publicly have resonance with the findings of this research. The respondents wanted quite clearly an acknowledgement of the often painful and marginalizing struggles that they have experienced. Sub-point (b) emphasises the need to “actively promote an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance rather than fear and rejection.” This resonates with the ‘safe place’ requested by participants and is in line with what was discovered in the in-depth interviews. Sub-point(d) encourages congregations and ministers to “actively promote church family intimacy and the inclusion of those with same-sex attractions.” These ideas also voiced by the research participants require inclusion and meaningful relational engagement with the Church. In (g), the clergy is told to “use inclusive language and be sensitive towards those who are single. For example, how Mothers/Father’s Days are approached” and significantly also in sub-point (i) “to encourage the kind of spiritual friendship enjoyed by David and Jonathon in which brother leans upon brother and sister leans upon sister.” Yet even when faced with that possibility, the PCI still felt the need to introduce

a cautionary note, “As with friendships between a male and a female, wisdom and caution are necessary, if there are feelings of attraction. If that is a challenge, being part of a small group of friends can create a healthier relational dynamic” (2020, 24). Recently, Aimee Byrd was criticized for her book, *Why Can't We be Friends* that presented the case for stronger emotional and spiritual bonds to exist between the sexes regardless of the marital status of those involved. Once again, it is possible that the fear of intimacy stimulating sexual feelings has precipitated this qualifier. However, the move towards a more fully embracing covenant community creates optimism, in so far as its focus is on the relational aspects of our togetherness.

To move this process forward within the PCI and support those experiencing childlessness, two areas of theological importance must be examined, namely, eschatology and ecclesiology. The former, will have import for the subjects of marriage and procreation, and the latter, for how we relate to one another as a covenant community. Moss and Baden's work is helpful in recalibrating views on infertility both within PCI and the wider church. Under the heading of eschatology, it will also be beneficial to examine Robert Song's book *Covenant and Calling* which is important because it became the catalyst to the discord between the Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Once having outlined the relevance of the aforementioned positions, a third possible eschatological perspective will be given. This third perspective will not necessarily ease the pain of those contending with involuntary childlessness, but it will set it within a theological context where the centrality of the biological family within the covenant community is significantly challenged. As a result, this third perspective creates an opportunity for PCI and other Christian faith communities to emphasis an ecclesiology that is conceptually and practically more inclusive of diversity and difference. This clearly focused requirement for a more inclusive community will require a different filter, not a filter shaped by marriage and procreation, but one viewed through the lens of eschatology. In the next chapter I will unpack what theological significance this might have not only for members of the PCI commune, but for the entire Christian church.

Chapter 6: Theological Reflections

6.1 Introduction

The issues raised by the research require some theological reflection. In this chapter I will succinctly state two of Moss and Baden's theological contentions and extrapolate from these what could be useful in reshaping our ecclesiology's in the light of an applied eschatology. I will also review Roberts' application of eschatology to the concept of covenant partnership, particularly as this was catalyst to theological deliberation on the part of PCI. Having determined the significance of this for PCI, some consideration will be given to PCI's theological focus since 2005/6 as this will demonstrate both its interest and theological priorities. After having considered those, I will theologically examine how reshaping our ecclesiology in the light of the eschaton can enhance our understanding of what it means to be a covenant community through the bond of Christian siblingship.

6.2 Eschatology

The introductory chapter of this study fully outlined the biblical and eschatological significance of what Moss and Baden are suggesting. There is in their writing a journey of humanity created in God's image from Eden (protological) to Heaven (eschatological). They felt it necessary to query certain theological assumptions about fertility and infertility as they relate to 'the fall' as narrated in Genesis 1-3. Without retracing the previous steps already discussed, two salient quotes crystallise their basic assumptions. First is the assumption that Paul devalues marriage in favour of celibacy, and secondly, that the eschaton without marriage and procreation is a fitting template for a sexless soteriology in the present age. The following reminds us of their perspective on Paul's perception of marriage, Moss and Baden assert that:

Paul encouraging his communities to eschew marriage and focus on God means that he devalues procreation and childbearing. When we consider that Paul *is* interested in the *family* of believers, his lack of attention to parenthood becomes especially noteworthy. It places him in tension with modern Christian views of parenthood as the cornerstone of the family and in line with Jesus' teaching about leaving one's own biological family behind to receive a new divine family. (173)

Whereas their position resonates with what Jesus maintains about alignment to a new spiritual family as opposed to biological ties, it is not necessary to interpret Paul as devaluing procreation and childbearing. Paul's apparent low view of marriage does not equate to devaluation, and it is not necessarily in conflict with Paul's high view of marriage stated elsewhere. Paul's apparent high view of marriage is presented in Ephesians chapter five and an apparent low view of marriage in favour of celibacy is expressed in 1 Corinthians 7. To unravel this apparent tension, it is necessary to consider Paul's teaching in Ephesians 5:21-33.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body.³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. ³³ Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband. (NRSV)

Mutter, by using ‘discourse analysis’ which examines the linguistic and historical setting of this passage, concludes that, “the vocabulary in Xenophen, Aristotle, and Arius Didymus suggests the presence of socially defined assumptions about prescribed general roles and the use of power within marriage” (Mutter 2018, 11). Mutter seeks to establish the historical and linguistic context to determine if Ephesians 5:21-23 is an attempt to retain the “household codes” or a significant departure from social norms. He concludes that: The

structure of Ephesians locates the family or household within the context of the church, making it a subset of the community of faith. This is in stark contrast to the secular household codes that position the household as the foundation upon which a well-ordered society is built...submitting to one another in reverence for Christ in Eph. 5:21 suggests a departure from the secular *Haustafeln* in that it introduces the idea of reciprocity within the marital relationship. (2018, 12,13)

It is accepted that regardless of how certain Greek words relating to headship, rule and submission are interpreted, it does not alter the fact that the writer was shifting attention away from the biological family unit within the context of the covenant family. In the ancient near east, domestic families as socio-political units were governed by household codes that facilitated stability and good governance. Instead, the Christological focus diverted attention away from those biological units and positioned them as only *one sub-set* located in a new community now under different governance. As Mutter maintains,

The focus of Eph. 5:21-33 is not that good marriages and households ensure the good of society (or even the church), but rather that the husband and wife's individual experiences of adoption into God's household through the work of Christ along with the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit contributes to healthy family households. (2018, 14)

This is a major shift that challenged existing household arrangements at the time, and even today, the way in which domestic units appear to dominate church policy and attention. The Christological center of Ephesians 5 only elevates marriage as an example of divine love when such domestic units reflect the love of Jesus for the Church and within the Church. The writer is not holding marriage up as the example to follow, but rather the relationship that Christ has with the Church is the example that all people and all marriages should imitate. Paul may have had a high view of marriage but suffers from the paradox of elevation and devaluation, both a rupture and a fulfilment. It may also be possible to position a view of

marriage at any given reference point along the protological – eschatological timeline. The closer it is to its protological origin (Eden and the command regarding procreation) with the more functional elements of human multiplication and sexual activity the lower the eternal value in Paul's theology. Hence, Paul links the lower view of marriage in order to regulate sexual desire and the avoidance of sin. When marriage is simply a process of selecting one individual over another to have intimacy, Paul places little value on these things by saying it is better to marry under these conditions to avoid sin, hence, his low view of marriage as found in 1 Corinthians 7.

However, when such exclusive relationships fall under the restorative plan of the eschaton, they are governed by different community rules. This realignment breathes new life into old patterns of selection and adds new imagery to sexual union that has profound mystical and spiritual significance. Such a marriage might even be elevated to the same status as celibacy if the union between two individuals as 'one flesh' serves the body of Christ with selfless love and commitment. Understanding what it means to be wedded to Christ in this way brings an altogether different eschatological perspective to existing marriage arrangements. As the married couple lives in the light of the eschaton, only then are the affairs of this world (Pauline distractions) surrendered to God in the same manner as the celibate, creating an opportunity for selfless love within and for the body of Christ.

According to Moss and Baden's second perspective, God's default position is infertility based on their understanding on the eschaton:

The remarkable aspect of the elevation of infertility is not that it stands apart from other disabilities, but rather that it stands as a part of the tableau of heavenly perfection. Barrenness is not the exception to the rule; it is the new rule. It is not the new normal; it is the heavenly ideal. Perhaps, here the reflection of heavenly realities sheds light onto earthly ones. (228)

When such a proposal is made and following the trajectory of their arguments presented in chapter one, not only does voluntary childlessness within marriage become an acceptable choice, but the position of remaining childless without choice is given a new perspective. In Moss and Baden's proposals, such childlessness should not be viewed as a disability or a product of the fall, but rather as a window of a heavenly state that all human beings will one day enter. No one would suggest that this will alleviate the genuine pain or longing that a childless couple may experience, rather, what that struggle reveals is the divine paradox between the world as it *is now*— and the world that is *not yet*. This is a struggle that will continue until the eschaton is ultimately realized. However, the hope remains that what is still in the future can, by the Spirit of God, be entered into more fully as time progresses. Therefore, it may be possible that the desire to have children could be mitigated not by personal resignation or a sense of failure, but rather by a deepening awareness that a realized eschatology could disempower their temporal reality.

It is, therefore, the eschatologically realised selfless giving in marriage that Paul cherishes, rather than the temporal bonds of human lineage and procreation. Alexander, scholar, and Irish Presbyterian, observes in his book, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, with reference to Eph 5:25-33, that:

Paul observes an interesting parallel between Christ's love for the church and the love a man should have for his wife. This link is noteworthy, for it conveys something of the intensity of the love we shall experience in the New Jerusalem. The love we shall receive and give will resemble the love experienced between a man and a woman when they commit themselves to each other in a relationship marked by exclusive allegiance to one another.... The New Jerusalem promises holiness, wholeness, and love in the presence of God. While our inheritance still lies in the future, we must claim our citizenship now. (2008, 186-187)

This is noteworthy for several reasons. Firstly, it links exclusive, intimate, and monogamous human affection with the love we shall experience in the eschaton, even

though, as Alexander admits, it is not a perfect match. Secondly, it acknowledges that wholeness of love is something that in part can be *apprehended now*. What this observation implies, but does not state, is that the imagery used in Ephesians 5 is not dependent on the existence of an extended family for the analogy to hold true. However, thankfully, Alexander has called even this imagery only an ‘interesting parallel’ because it is certainly not Paul’s primary analogy of eschaton love.

Instead, the most fitting parallel to eschaton love is depicted by Paul’s ecclesiology for which the nature and implications for that love and its implications for childlessness will be considered later in the chapter. What Alexander does claim is that “the intimate love that a man and a woman share, founded on a deep commitment to each other, *can hardly be surpassed* (italics mine). This is the kind of love that will bind us to God in the New Jerusalem” (2008, 186). Alexander’s contention that it *can hardly be surpassed* is apposite. However, Alexander is not denying that it will not be surpassed. In fact, ecclesiology, rather than the institution of marriage, is a more fitting portrayal of eschaton love. Christ’s eternal love demonstrated to the church and experienced ‘in Christ’ by the church is a more fitting description of eternal love than time-bound marriages. Whilst Paul is referring to marriage, even at its most elevated points, it still remains a selection process where one individual is chosen over another. However, what alarms PCI is whether heterosexual marriage is the only appropriate human bond that can reflect such loving commitment and intimacy.

Robert Song distinguishes between a ‘marriage’ and ‘covenant’ bond within which intimate love can be expressed. In the marriage bond, he affirms the three goods of marriage that historically and traditionally have the widest acceptance, namely, faithfulness, permanency, and procreation. In his working definition of the goods of marriages, he contends:

By faithfulness, I mean not just the commitment of the partners to forsake all others and stay faithful to the marital bed, but also to provide mutual protection, support, and love. By permanence is meant, not an indissoluble, sacramental bond which makes divorce ontologically impossible, as found in the Roman Catholic teaching, but the moral bond created by the promise of faithfulness so long as both partners shall live. By procreation I mean openness to having children because of the couple's sexual relationship, mindful of the fact that not all marriages will in fact be fertile. (Song 2015, 7) He further claims: The element of a shared task, of the fruitfulness of the relationship of Adam and Eve, is an indication in the Genesis narrative that marriage is not solely for the mutual satisfaction of husband and wife...it has a specific orientation to having children...children do not appear here as an optional extra to the otherwise self-contained nature of marriage. They are not extrinsic or contingent...Rather, as presented in Genesis, the procreation and nurture of children is an inseparable and intrinsic good of marriage, a result of God's blessing and command to be fruitful . . . a child is the entirely proper and fitting expression in the oneness of his or her flesh of the parent's own one-flesh bond. (Song 2015, 6)

This is a significant departure from Moss and Baden who view the command to 'go forth and multiply' to be a temporary command to populate the earth, one that is time specific, and time bound. Song also places an ontological significance on the bearing of children unlike the more functional perspective shared by Moss and Baden. Song declares that "God creates not out of whim, nor out of necessity, but out of free love for his creation, so also the creation is the outworking of the eternal and free covenant commitment internal to the Godhead. In our finite covenant relationships, we bear witness to the eternal covenant relationships within the very being of God" (2015, 10). Nevertheless, whilst Song clearly states what he believes to be an intrinsic good of marriage, he also affirms the temporality of human marriage where in the eschatological fulfilment of creation all elements attributed to time bound marriages are made redundant. Here, Song very much follows the progression of thought shared by Moss and Baden:

The pattern of thought throughout the New Testament does not depict marriage and family life as part of the eschatological future. Whereas conventional Jewish eschatology depicted the age to come as 'a time of abundance and fruitful families', this is precisely the option that Jesus and Paul refuse to endorse. Indeed, it is striking that there is almost nothing in the New Testament which actively encourages having children, nor is procreation ever given as a reason for Christians to seek marriage. The New Testament message of

eschatological disruption undermines assumptions of this-worldly stability and permanence. Likewise, the significance of procreation has changed...children are a sign of God's continuing goodness. Indeed, now after the incarnation children are no longer essential for our identity, we may affirm that the birth of every single child has become more evidently what they always were, namely, a sign of divine gratuity. (Song 2015, 19-20)

Up to this point, Irish Presbyterians might find themselves agreeing with Song's endorsement of the goods of marriage. In fact, regardless of what else Song says about marriage, he is very conventional as to how he understands it with reference to procreation. "It is not justifiable to enter upon marriage deliberately intending not to have children than it is to enter marriage deliberately intending not to be faithful" (Song 2015, 32). It is now that Song moves to the main crux of his argument, suggesting that since vocational celibacy is a deliberate withholding of marriage and procreation, "there might be other forms of non-procreated relationship that may also function as a kind of eschatological witness" (Song 2015, 27). In short, he believes there is, as seen here:

Instead of biological procreativity, they would be characterized by other forms of fruitfulness. Since such relationships are eschatologically grounded, they would take their orientation from the demands of the Kingdom. In-line with Paul's aspirations in 1 Corinthians 7, they would be freed to be anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; they could not be self-enclosed or self-satisfied but would be open to the call of charity beyond themselves. Echoing in the new eschatological context, God's original declaration about Adam that it is not good for human beings to be alone, their relationship would enable each to be a helper to the other, making possible a degree of fruitfulness in the service of the Kingdom that might not have been possible for them as individuals. (Song 2015, 28)

So, according to Song, if an eschatological witness can theoretically exist without biological procreativity, then who might be included in such a category? Song includes not only the celibate but also those who remain deliberately childless, and into that final category he refers to three groups. He dismisses those who for selfish, consumerist, or narcissistic reasons refuse to have children, but rather the first category may include those that have done

so for morally justifiable reasons. He does not give definitive parameters as to who would be included in such a list; however, examples include genetically inherited conditions, missions work, chronic mental health conditions, age, or ecological reasons. As he reflects upon this first category, he concludes that:

The partnership that such couples embark on may be marked by complete fidelity and commitment to permanence. Indeed, they are conventionally called marriage and have the legal and social statue of marriage. And yet in their deliberate childlessness, they reject one of the three goods of marriage . . . Might it not be the case, we could enquire, that there is concealed in some such examples the germ of a different kind of calling, not strictly marriage in creation as traditionally understood, but to something subtly and importantly different. That a relationship deliberately did not have children, far from being an implicit transgression of creation norms, might be precisely the qualification needed to allow other sorts of ministries to prosper and other outworking of charity to bear fruit. (Song 201, 31, 33)

A second category is made up of those who are childless by contingency rather than choice and this would include those who enter marriage late because of age or with known infertility problems or discover infertility after marriage. Here, Song is tiptoeing around nuances that are difficult to disentangle at times as he slowly builds his case. However, he is clear to point out that the aforementioned categories not only illustrate aspects of marriage but also non-procreative partnerships where fruitfulness has been redefined not on traditional marriage lines because procreation, for justifiable reasons, is not possible. On the contrary, grounded in anticipation of the eschaton, they demonstrate something that may even be equal to, though different from, the creative good of marriage. It is what Song is leading us to that Irish Presbyterians find alarming and contextually threatening when he writes:

There are no prizes for guessing where this argument is going. Might it be that same-sex couples could also form covenant partnerships? Could they also bear eschatological witness to the good of faithfulness, permanence, and fruitfulness, and thus participate in the corporate ecclesial discernments of vocation in which some are called to bear witness to the goods of creation, others to creations fulfilment in the coming Kingdom . . . or can sex have meaning even when separated from an openness to procreation? (Song 2015, 37)

Song argues that sexual differentiation is expected within marriage and justifiable so because creation is orientated towards procreation. However, he then concludes that “if procreation is no longer eschatologically necessary, then there are no grounds for requiring all committed relationships to be heterosexual” (Song 2015, 49). The fact that Song argues for sexual intimacy in covenant partnerships takes the discussion beyond the realm of its eschatological significance and one imagines far beyond what is generally accepted within the Reformed evangelical tradition. However, with reference to the eschatological significance of his claims, he concludes that:

Some are called to marriage that is open to procreation to show forth God’s continuing commitment to his creation. Some are called to celibacy to point forward to the time when God will be all in all. And some are called to non-procreative covenant relationships to witness to the times between the times, when God’s purposes for creation have been fulfilled in Christ, but where we await their final manifestation. But all have a gifting within the Church, and all are called to discern their gifting. (Song 2015, 50)

Song’s differentiation between marriage and covenant partnerships is a genuine attempt at protecting a more conventional view of marriage, but he also seeks to include the desire for intimacy and purpose for same sex-couples that transcends friendship or celibacy. Whilst many may disagree with the concept of sexual relations outside of the conventional view of marriage, non-sexual covenant partnerships may indeed be entirely appropriate, as evidenced in the case of David and Jonathan found in the Scriptures. However, Song’s proposals are deficient for several reasons.

Firstly, he does not consider the claims made by Moss and Baden regarding the time specific nature of procreation. One can only assume he was not aware of the argument or had already dismissed it and, if so, he has never tried to engage with it. As it stands, his premise about the ongoing necessity of incorporating procreation into the creative goods of marriage,

even temporarily inseparable from fidelity and permanency, is less compelling than the argument presented by Moss and Baden. In fact, even on his own admission, there is a significant lack of reference to procreation in the Gospels in particular and the New Testament in general. This calls into question the importance that he has placed upon it, particularly as the New Testament shifts its eschatological focus away from the biological family as anything analogous to the afterlife.

Secondly, his desire to give procreation ontological significance as a demonstration of the creativity of God is speculative at best. It would appear that 'new birth' or people being 'born from above' has more ontological significance as the essence of God's creative work in partnership with the church than time-specific acts of raising biological families. Critical to this claim is that the church is now defined and described in ways that are generally descriptive of marriage and procreation. Terms such as 'union, bride of Christ, family, multiplication and brothers and sisters' take on an eschatological significance that diminishes the intensity of images once focused on marriage and procreation. Now the church bears the image of a gospel community where the seed is planted in fertile ground and produces a rich spiritual harvest. When the church is perceived in this way, it elevates the mind and actions of the community to seek first the Kingdom of God where the Holy Spirit is procreator birthing new life in Christ. The shift is away from biological legacy towards divine inheritance; a new community in the here and the now, but also a community living in the now and not yet.

Thirdly, and perhaps more importantly to us, Songs advocates 'covenant partnerships' as an appropriate eschatological application of the non-procreative capacity of human beings in the afterlife. The fact that Song uses this to establish the possibility of non-procreative relationships to incorporate same sex attracted couples is not only arbitrary but rather limiting

and perhaps a little misleading. He is contending that a more appropriate eschatological application of the non-procreative status of human beings in the afterlife is in fact sibling relationships within the church.²⁰ The original context of Christ's statements in Matthew 22:23ff had only by inference shed light on the individual's marital status in heaven.²¹ The question about which wife would be known in heaven was less important to Jesus than reflecting on the subject of divorce. However, what Jesus appears to confirm is that marital relationships in heaven are defined and experienced differently than they had been on earth. It could also be reasonably inferred that the process of human selection and choice regarding life-partners has been removed altogether and for the following reasons.

Whilst Adam and Eve shared a perfect bond of completeness, it is deficient to suggest that the *ontological* nature of the creative being is mirrored in the human ability to procreate. This scepticism is grounded in the fact that procreation is linked to the necessity of filling and

²⁰ A Similar objection to Song (although with a slightly different nuance and conclusion) has been constructed by Ian Paul, "On the one hand (Song) imagines that there might be a form of marriage-like relations which anticipate marriage in the age to come, when Jesus explicitly says that there will be no more marriage. The eschatological fulfilment of marriage is not non-procreative marriage, but the absence of marriage as an inter-human relationship in the light of the marriage supper of the lamb (Rev 19.6-9), which is union of God with his people" (2016, 13). <https://www.psephizo.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Ian-Paul-Sexed-in-Heaven-for-pubn.docx>.

²¹ Ben Witherington expresses his views somewhat differently when commenting on the parallel passage in the Gospel of Mark writes, "Thus Mark has Jesus saying that no new marriages will be initiated in the eschatological state. This is surely not the same as claiming that all existing marriages will disappear in the eschatological state. Jesus, then, would seem to be arguing against a specific view held by the Sadducees about the continuity between this life and the life to come, a view involving the ongoing practice of levirate marriage" (2001, 329). This view is problematic for the following reasons: first, even if it does apply to new marriages in the eschaton, it still leaves Jesus dramatically failing to answer the very real, as opposed to hypothetical question, which marriage partner will they have a *particular* knowledge of or *relationship with*? In short, they are asking a very important question, which of these marriages will *actually* exist? Secondly, within the socio-historical context of those asking Jesus the question, the relationship of marriage, sexual relations and procreation were so closely connected, that if marriage persisted so should all aspects of that marriage be retained. Thirdly, the continuation of marriage in the afterlife creates some genuine difficulties around death of a spouse and remarriage. Again, the question could legitimately be asked about which of those existing marriages (outside the levirate exclusions) will persist. Fourthly, the continuation of existing marriages in the afterlife seems incompatible with the eschatological bridegroom church analogy found elsewhere in the New Testament. In short, it is not the perfection of marriages that we will experience in the eschaton but the perfection of all human relationships - a perfect equal and compatible bond.

subduing the earth. At this stage, it is necessary to separate *human capacity* from *human essence* and the command to populate the earth is functional rather than ontological. That is not to deny there are divinely analogous images appropriate to procreation, but to attribute some ontological significance is a step too far. The reproduction of children was an *essential* requirement until a visible community bearing God's name could be identified. There is nothing in the scriptural text to suggest that Adam and Eve were ontologically deficient without children.

In the post-fall narrative, the perfect bond between couples had been marred and broken and sexual relationships became heavily regulated. Hypothetically, even if human beings had been able to self-regulate their relationships and remain monogamous, as humanity populated the earth their capacity to do so post-fall was evidentially impaired. As a consequence, a system of laws and regulations has been imposed on human relationships in order to regulate fidelity and permanence. As a result, the process of human selection by arrangement with limited volition was now the experience of human couples and what emerged later as greater freedom still required one individual to be selected over another. In a 'fallen state', sensual desire and physical intimacy require regulation and as such the process of selection must occur to limit sexual desires. What Jesus is referring to in addressing his critics in Matthew 22 is that such a system of selection in many cases had failed and, because of sin, continues to fail. Whereas the regulating of human relationships in heaven based on human selection will be redundant. Human beings may have decided who will enter into exclusive relationships on earth, but a community based on divine choice populates heaven.

It is here that Song's eschatology is deficient when it parallels heavenly relationships with non-procreative 'covenant partnerships. Song, perhaps inadvertently, is still placing emphasis upon human selection as a way of creating fidelity and permanence, but by doing

so, he has subtly shifted the eschatological focus to selection as opposed to inclusion. To do so weakens the eschatological trajectory of the Old and New Testaments which is moving towards an all-inclusive covenant community rather than a limited and time bound selection of one human being over and against another. Here, fidelity and permanence have to be regulated through exclusivity. This is hardly what the eschaton points towards.

The Old Testament narrative begins with an eschatological sequence that requires two human beings to procreate in order to produce a nation, and whilst biological procreation is an important aspect of everyday life, procreative language, impediment and imagery shift to the people of God now defined not by ethnicity, but spirituality. Zion this time, rather than individuals, manifests signs of fertility or barrenness in their dealings with God. Yet even God would not allow the disobedience of the Hebrew people to thwart the restoration of the human race, not even the barrenness of couples could derail that process. God demonstrates through the lived experiences of Old Testament characters that what human being failed to deliver, God provided, that is, a family tree leading to Christ. The Old Testament moves towards the incarnation demonstrating the telos of God soteriological and eschatological purposes. The birth of Jesus models a form of inclusion that had been substantially absent in the history of Israel. Jesus demonstrated this by healing and teaching those marginalized by ethnicity, ritual or bodily impurity and welcomed a new Kingdom. This kingdom could no longer be enclosed within real or conceptualized borders but must extend to all nations. In the remaining corpus of the New Testament, it is clear that Pentecost requires a fulfilment that breaches the divisions of fractured relationships in gender, race, and status. As a result, the church, as opposed to individuals, marriages, or even proposed covenant partnerships, is moving toward the ultimate fulfilment of the eschaton and will make even Song's selective covenant partnerships redundant along with the current state of marriage and procreation.

However, in the General Assembly report of 2018, the Doctrine Committee produced its own criticism of Song and sadly, perhaps without merit, it accused the Church of Scotland's Theological Forum of basing their report on, "one slender and idiosyncratic account of sexual ethics" (GA Annual Reports 2018, 81). The Doctrine Committee gave three reasons for this objection. Firstly, that it consists of an over-realised eschatology, "Of course, the gospel proclaims that we will one day be like the angels in heaven (Matt. 22:30), but it is an over-realised eschatology to claim that experience now" (ibid). Secondly, it severs the link between nature and grace and suggests that Song's position has the tendency to create:

. . . a dualism that separates the supernatural from the natural. In contrast, the Reformed faith confesses that grace restores, renews, and raises the natural. Bavinck summarises it in this way, "[R]e-creation is not a system that supplements creation, as in Catholicism, not a religious reformation that leaves creation intact, as in Luther, much less a new creation as in Anabaptism, but a joyful tiding of all creatures. (ibid)

Whilst such a position offers some protection against abandoning gender binaries through grace "restoring, renewing or raising the natural", yet a lack of a detailed response does not answer the question of how a very clear biblical reference in Mt 22:30 to non-procreative relationships in heaven is translated into the here and now. Ironically, the PCI's third objection to Song requires them to follow through in seeking an appropriately realised eschatology that would require a shift away from the biocentricity of the temporal world, which is prominent in many churches as stated below:

The suggested new paradigm, replacing heterosexual vs homosexual with procreative vs non-procreative, defines marriage far too narrowly in reproductive terms. The biblical-theological warrant for this move is not presented and the theological tradition of the church has long included within the goods of marriage aspects of human flourishing distinguishable from reproduction yet exclusive to marriage. (ibid)

The irony and hope within this one statement cannot go undetected. Ironically, such an observation has not been translated into institutional support for those contending with childlessness, but the statement provides hope that such a re-positioning is possible. Even if PCI is going to retain procreation as one of the goods of marriage, it has added human flourishing without children as an appropriate accompaniment to those goods. Such a development will require an attempt to explain the characteristics of a non-procreative marriage flourishing within the covenant of grace in anticipation of – and presently influenced – by the eschaton. If such a move is forthcoming, it will require a theological shift in order to avoid an unhelpful and unnecessary focus on the nuclear family.

It is also ironic that the PCI, with its purported interest and support for covenant communities, appears to be so biocentric. The fact that some ministers do not engage in a congregational promise at baptism demonstrates a type of individualism so prevalent within some forms of evangelicalism, even those historically situated within the Reformed tradition, which Horton observes: Across the spectrum of evangelicalism, the presupposition is widely shared that the individual believer's personal relationship with Jesus is immediate, inward, and direct, based on one's decision to accept Christ, and that membership in the church is also an individual decision that may (or in some cases may not) serve that basic contract. (Horton 2008, 180)

This form of contract is counter to the covenantal community and in order to address this problem, a renewed emphasis on ecclesiology is required. Whilst PCI debates over what constitutes a credible profession of faith for the individual may be necessary, it can no longer be considered in isolation. That is not to say that such a debate should not happen, but it needs to take place alongside a renewed effort to establish a community of ecclesial siblings where bio-centricity is eliminated. The final section will consider at least two of those elements required to create momentum for change.

6.3 A Renewed Ecclesiology and Eschatology

In fairness to Song, ecclesiology was never the focus of his attention and one can only presume that if it had been, he would have given it more prominence. However, emphasizing selected human relationships unintentionally *diminishes* the focus of *non-procreative relationships within the church*, and by doing so places the alternative within the limits imposed by celibacy. Rather, there is transcendence to the eschaton that elevates it above the sexualisation of time-limited relationships restricted by regulations imposed by the need to protect fidelity and permanence.

For the PCI to become a more inclusive community, it will require more than a shift in practice. As it currently stands, throughout the last fifteen years, the Doctrine Committee has considered a variety of topics, nevertheless, recurring patterns seem to emerge. These key patterns within the Doctrine Committee Reports are detailed in (Appendix IV: PCI Doctrine Committee Reports). This table (Appendix IV) illustrates the general topic under consideration and the comments provide a summary of PCI's own findings, proposals or policy changes.

It was necessary to review the Doctrine Committee's material because, firstly, it is the Committee's remit to react to the concerns of the church. Secondly, it reflects the mood of the denomination. Thirdly, this brief survey, Appendix IV, reveals the content of its deliberations upon which some provisional observations can be made.

Firstly, neither the Doctrine Committee nor the Pastoral Care Committee has demonstrated any theological or pastoral consideration for those experiencing infertility.

Second, by assessing the theological content under review, it is not difficult to imagine why the subject of infertility becomes marginalized. From 2008 to 2014, the Doctrine Committee's reports have focused on marriage, children, and baptism. Albeit the

subject of ‘being human’ commissioned in 2014-2015 potentially looked more promising but has not yet been forthcoming. Since 2017-2019, ecumenism and sexual identity have dominated the issues. Due to the disappearance of infertility as a pastoral concern, it is unlikely to reappear in the Doctrine Committee reports *even* though it is a genuine topic for consideration under the topic of marriage, procreation, or human identity. Whilst it may be argued that the subject of involuntary childlessness is not a doctrinal issue, the theological landscape that surrounds it certainly is. The content of the reports does reveal just where the theological focus of the denomination appears to be.

Thirdly, this survey corroborates Stewart’s findings in his doctoral work, *The Ebb and Flow of Grace*. For example, as PCI have significant reservations about the joint declaration on justification and seek to preserve a traditional understanding of sexual identity, strong lines of demarcation are drawn, both theologically and ethically. The boundary lines are erected by PCI to reaffirm their orthodoxy and orthopraxis and are appropriately regulated. These boundary lines are even more clearly marked and are linked to the exclusion of Union Theological College from Queen’s University over the vote of the General Assembly to not baptize children of same-sex marriages, and the expulsion of a member of UTC teaching staff by PCI in the light of that controversy, (see Appendix V11: PCI Professor Dismissal) The marking of these parameters suggests a drift towards confrontation, purging and realignment rather than an extension of grace. The problem for many who are experiencing childlessness is the potential of becoming even less visible as battle lines are drawn and reshaped. Those contending with voluntary, involuntary, or circumstantial childlessness do not want the sympathy of the church, but rather a robust theology that fully includes them in it. There are no historical or theological reasons why PCI cannot depart from the more defensive position adopted of late and move towards a more proactive embracement of human flourishing.

Whilst Moss and Baden may have rightly queried the permanency of procreation within marriage, this position is unlikely to receive much support within the PCI. Nevertheless, within the PCI's criticism of Song, there are glimmers of hope and opportunity. If the Doctrine Committee genuinely believes that Song placed too much emphasis on procreation, then they have a wonderful opportunity to explain *why*. Further, with their current focus on marriage, sexual identity and the ontological nature of personhood, now is an opportune time for a change of emphasis. Secondly, although mistakenly, they believe that Song's eschatology is over-realised (as opposed to deficient), then opportunity exists to explain why that is the case. For the PCI to achieve this, they will need to present a realizable eschatology of marriage within an ecclesial framework. Perhaps, if the PCI were to take up this challenge, the focus would shift away from covenant communities that inadvertently exclude people to more inclusive communities consistent with the approaching eschaton. The PCI believed that Song's sexual ethic was distorted by an over-realised eschatology based on a departure from the authority of God's Word. Yet, an opportunity currently exists for the PCI to creatively re-think how a community of faith governed by biblical principles would look and act as it is shaped by the eschaton.

This revision may require a new language, imagery and, certainly, renewed focus on what it means to be adopted into the family of God. What will be discussed in the next section can only be the beginning of a proposal that nudges the Reformed tradition (as it is expressed by the PCI) towards a more comprehensive ecclesiology appropriate to the those marginalised by infertility.

6.4 Covenantal Communities

A covenantal perspective is a challenge to the propensity of individualism within the local expression of church even as Horton contends that “The covenantal motif has tremendous potential to orient ecclesiology toward an integration of the one and many, local and broader assemblies, the invisibility of the church in election, and the visibility of the church in the covenant community” (Horton 2008, 198). The apparent ease with which Horton talks about the integration of the ‘one and the many’ is set against his polemic on ‘*Totus Christus*’. Horton is unhappy with an ecclesiology where the ontological reality of the individual is assumed or absorbed into the fully realized eschatology of Christ’s presence with the church. Instead, he states:

In its eucharistic assembly, then, the ‘multitude’ remains as ontologically diverse and distinct as they are covenantally united as one body. It is precisely in the diversity of gifts bestowed by the *head* on “*each one individually*” that the *whole body* receives what it needs (1 Cor. 12:4–31; cf. Eph. 4:7–13). Even Christ is one of the ‘many’ who constitute this body, though he constitutes it as *head*. (Horton 2008, 166)

The reason that Horton stresses its ontological diversity is that he believes there is a temptation within Catholicism to the ‘fuse of persons’ also evident (he believes) within some forms of radical orthodoxy. For Horton, the fuse of persons undermines a ‘plurality of persons’. Douglas Farrow also believes that such a ‘fuse’ of persons is an over-realised eschatology when he says:

Ancients and moderns are allied in misconstruing the alienation between God and humanity in terms of epistemological or ontological distance. Consequently, they are allied also in constructing systems of mediation which, even where Christological, operate by denying Christ’s particularity. For the only way to overcome alienation, thus understood, is to eradicate distance and otherness: to unite, to homogenize, to divinize; in effect, to universalize the incarnation. And there is no way to do that without turning away from the human Jesus, or indeed from what makes *us* human. (Farrow 1999, 255)

These are essential distinctions that need to be retained at the beginning of this final section, as diminishing individualism within the body of Christ does not suggest a fusion and loss of personal ontology. There is no hypostatic union between believers where the plurality of persons is lost. Horton rightly observes that:

In a covenantal model, the *hypostatic* union of deity and humanity in Christ is distinguished from the *mystical* union of the church with its head. Christ is the federal head of his body, rather than the corporate personality. The person and work of Christ then and there, completed once and for all, is in no way extended or completed by the church; nevertheless, the Spirit's work here and now is just as crucial if there is to be an actual union with Christ and his benefits. (2008, 186)

Whether by overly inflated or deflated ecclesiologies of head-and-members, we lose much of the eschatological tension and pneumatological richness required for a sound ecclesiology. As an analogy, the body of Christ is neither a univocal description nor an equivocal figure of speech. Taken univocally, the theory of the church “as ‘the extension of the Incarnation,’” as Newbigin observes, “springs from a confusion of *sarx* with *soma*.” “Christ’s risen body”—that is, his ecclesial distinguished from his natural body— “is not fleshly but spiritual.” “He did not come to incorporate us in His body according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Hence, comes his promise that when he ascends, he will send the Spirit. Newbigin’s point reminds us of the importance of both the ascension of Christ in the flesh and the descent of the Spirit. Our union with Christ does not occur at the level of fused natures, but as a common participation of different members in the same realities of the age to come by the same Spirit (Horton 2008, 187).

A number of points raised hereby Horton have significance to the research. Firstly, there is the concern of an over-realised eschatology that detracts from the ontological reality of the individual as a separate entity within the life of the church. The redress to

individualism is not to deny it, but rather to appropriately contextualise it. This contextualisation takes place within the covenants of the Old and New Testaments historically grounded and eschatologically anticipated and partially realized. Secondly, and perhaps, contextually as important for this research, is the claim that as believers we have a union with Christ not as fused (inseparable) natures but as the “common participation of different members in the same realities of the age to come by the same spirit” (ibid). The challenge for any localised expression of covenant community is how they relate to *one another* as well as to Christ. If individuals retain such plurality, as Horton suggests, then how can covenant communities exhibit such unity as the eschaton approaches? One suggestion is to explore what it means to be a ‘Christian or ecclesial sibling’ and throughout the remainder of this study the terms will be used interchangeably.

6.5 Christian Siblingship

Regarding Christian siblingship, Aasgaard had already produced a sizeable treaty in his book entitled, *My Beloved Brothers and Sisters!’ Christian Siblingship in Paul* (2004). In that book, he charts the importance of family life in antiquity as influential upon the thinking of Paul. Aasgaard is not prepared to equate kinship terminology in antiquity or indeed within the Pauline corpus to parity within all relationships. However, this ambiguity may simply denote the flexibility often used when referencing the relationships between domestic kinship arrangements and also its partial mirroring in the early Church (2004, 307). As Burmgardner reflects upon this, he observes:

The NT use of Christian kinship language is somewhat flexible, and although this pattern (God = father; Christ = son; Christians = brothers and sisters) seems to be the most pervasive, it is not the only one. In 1 Tim 5:1–2, Paul uses a different pattern (older men and women in the church = fathers and mothers; younger men and women in the church = siblings). One might think of the first pattern as more ontological and the second as more functional. (2016, 5)

If Burmgardner's contention is correct that God = father; Christ = son; Christians = brothers and sisters, as the most pervasive in the New Testament, it is not unreasonable to assume that, regardless of any functional hierarchy that may have been developing, that ontologically at least, Christian siblingship suggests, at the very least, a proleptic equality. In every way, a definition of Christian siblingship, then and now, suggests the godly and transferrable values reflected in domestic arrangements are to be replicated and intensified within the Church's spiritual family. The current research suggests a change in perception and practice is needed within the PCI to fully embrace the concept of being a truly covenant community. Currently, baptismal practices may be responsible for inadvertently distancing those already feeling marginalized in church life. It is, therefore, proposed that a shift towards seeing congregants as co-participants in those vows marks the equality that a covenant community should possess. By creating equality in those vows, parishioners are fused together as a covenant community without the loss of plurality of persons. By creating such a fusion based on and expressed through a spiritual bond, attention is diverted from the importance of biological lineage to the collective inheritance found in Christ. However, this is only the beginning, as extending the nature of sibling relationships is a hotly contested issue within some factions of the evangelical church, particularly between the sexes.

This journey from individualism to collective responsibility is a challenging one. Within evangelicalism, the debate about gender equality is distinct from that on crossing gender boundaries in pursuit of wholistic relationships within the body of Christ. Most notably, the work of Aimee Byrd has come under severe criticism leading to her censure within certain church circles. In her book, *Why Can't We Be Friends*, she claims that in order to retain purity, the church has created a culture of avoidance, robbing our relationships of an eschatological beauty. To counter this, she writes:

What we expect in the future should shape our behavior here and now.... When we worship, we don't just walk into a building and go through some holy motions. We are summonsed by our almighty God to receive Christ and all his blessings through the gifts of the ministry of the Word and the sacrament. This divine liturgy of call and response becomes very real to us, and we are able to glimpse something amazing. During worship, believers get to taste of the heavenly worship that is to come. There is a sense in which our future reality of the new creation is breaking into our current lives in the present during corporate worship. (Byrd 2018, 16, 57)

As spiritual siblings are called together for worship, inherent within all Reformed traditions is the belief that, "We are summoned beings, and our aim is to direct all creation to its appointed end" (Horton 2011, 405). But what if that 'appointed' was to dissolve the distinctions between race, social status, and marital status? What if the dissolving of gender boundaries within a covenant community included the dismantling of a marital status often prioritized over and against other relationships? Would it be possible to envisage non-procreative partnerships as newly defined within covenant communities that reflected the eschaton, and where such relationships were not seen or experienced in terms of sexual threat or perceived as moral impropriety or license? Aimee Byrd believes that such a position is possible as Christian communities appropriate the eschaton. That purity of relationships emanates not from avoiding people of a particular gender, for fear of sexual temptation but treating them as spiritual brothers and sisters, even if they are married, but the responsibility is to rightly order those relationships according to the holiness modelled by Christ. The result of such obedience would be to fulfil Timothy's instruction from Paul and to treat "The older women as mothers and the younger women as sisters, in all purity" (1 Tim 5:2). With any covenant community seeking to live in the light of the eschaton, such relationships are not only advisable but should also be evidentially tangible, even if not fully realizable this side of Heaven. Without question, Paul had already recognized the potential danger of such relationships being seduced by sexual temptation, but he had not dissuaded them because of it. Aimee Byrd suggests, "When we love God, we love what he loves. This eradicates any

racism, sexism, ageism, classism, or any other reductive behaviour among us” (Byrd 2018, 66).

It is a mistake to read Ephesians 5 as indicating that the best human example of the potential of divinely inspired love is marriage. However, what the passage insists upon is that regardless of what form such relationships take – servants to masters, children to parent or husband and wives – such love is modelled on Christ’s love for the Church. In fact, the images used to exemplify loving commitment one to the other are more frequently favoured in the light of sibling relationships.

According to Aasgaard, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon use the root Greek word for siblings over a hundred times in comparison to terms like ‘holy’ and ‘church’ which relate to fewer than fifty occasions and only a limited number of times refers to the body of Christ (Aasgaard, 2004). Paul uses the relationship between siblings rather than marriage partners because he wants to emphasis something that is comparable to the temporal world – but also transcends it in the eschaton. Here Paul is following the example of Christ when he declares to the crowd in Matthew 12:46-50:

⁴⁶ While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” ⁴⁸ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” ⁴⁹ And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (NRSV)

As Weber maintains: Jesus loved and honoured his physical family (e.g., John 19:25–27), and he intended no insult to them. However, their presence gave him the opportunity to define an even more significant family. The head of this new family is God, the heavenly

Father. Membership in this family is determined not by blood, but by a relationship with the Father through covenant faith, evidenced by obedience to his will. (Weber 2000, 78)

This is a new family not prioritised in terms of human but spiritual kinship (Bloomberg 1992). It is a covenant community where the old ways of marking differentiation have been removed, not blurred, exhausted as opposed to emphasised, as Barclay writes:

In baptism, at the moment believers put on Christ and enter the body of Christ, these previous hierarchies of worth are rendered insignificant (Gal. 3.26-28; Col. 2.9-11). In Christ, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3.28). These differences are not erased, but they no longer matter, they can either divide or stratify the new Christian community . . . a Christian community not just to include both slaves and free people, men and women, but to regard their differences in status as insignificant, treating them no longer as markers of differential worth. (2016, 17)

It is perhaps in such a covenant community that those contending with infertility would love to dwell, where 'differences are not erased; but no longer matter'. During the research, one participant's experience was withheld from being reported until now as it masterfully illustrates the power of modelling blended families.

F13 was over seventy years of age but had contracted cancer when she was just seventeen. As one of the first Northern Ireland patients to be sent to England for chemotherapy, which was a pioneering treatment at the time, she was told that there was a high probability that she would be infertile. Married young, she spent the early years of marriage looking after her brothers and sisters and their children. She reflected that "That sort of facilitated my want of a child." Nevertheless, with tangible vividness, she remembered walking past shops, "and having that feeling of nearly going and lifting that child out of the pram and thinking to myself nobody would miss it. It is feelings that you get that you are not complete because you cannot have a child of your own." Later in the interview, she broke down as she recalled her mother's tears when her mother realised her daughter would be

childless. “I remember looking up at my mum and saying, ‘Well, sure you can have them for me.’ I can remember that as plain and the tears running down her face.”

The pain of childlessness was intensified every time a baby was born, with every pram she saw, and every baptism she attended. “I would have loved to be up there standing, getting my child baptised and being accepted as a mum in the church. Not just Mrs ****. It was just a real empty feeling I had. Yet I had come to accept that I would never have any children...and I wrapped myself around other people’s children pretending they were mine. I felt inadequate and useless.” There were nights that the interviewee had to be encouraged by her husband to come back to bed as she had heard a child cry in the next room, yet the room was empty.

She was married for seven years before her first biological child came along. It was a further seven years before the second biological child arrived, and then within the next two years two children in succession. What was quite remarkable was not that this childless woman had conceived, but also that, during those times she fostered forty-seven children and adopted five. When asked how she felt towards them and if it was tempting to make a distinction between them, she directed my attention to a large family photograph on the wall and said, “*Can you look at the photograph and tell me which ones are mine and which ones are not?*” I failed in a valiant attempt to distinguish them. She retold how, quite literally, visitors would come to the house and say openly in front of all the other children, “Which ones are yours and which ones are not?” To this she always responded, “You pick them out and I will tell you if you are right or not.” They never were able to provide the right answer. For example, the one many visitors selected as being the biological child because he resembled the paternal grandfather was, in fact, adopted.

F13 may have eschatological significance embodied in the narrative, a story elevated beyond the natural and one that is transcendent in nature. Or it could at least be a parable pointing to the perfectly blended family, realised in eternity but also being realised in the body of Christ. F13 named two children who came to stay with them as foster children aged twelve and ten. One evening, they came into the living room and asked, “Is it okay if we call you mum and dad?” They were there for only two weeks, yet they felt like part of this family, and they still are to this day. Yet, what united all these children were not only the love of parents, but also a visible church and covenant community that embraced them as their own. Each child, regardless of their status as natural, adopted or long-term foster care, had been baptised. In such a covenant community, distinctions were washed away by the waters of baptism, perhaps more fitting of the eschaton than previously realised. F13’s entire blended family had become part of a community of ecclesial siblings where biological parenthood was suppressed in favour of spiritual kinship in a new community where heaven may truly have touched earth.²² Without this major shift, those who find themselves marginalised because of involuntary childlessness will not only remain out of sight but also, for covenant communities, remain out of eschatological reach and they will be deprived of truly being mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters in intergenerational communities of faith. This co-participation as family toward children involves all and should permeate every relationship within the church in a realising eschatology, even as Schillebeeckx asserts:

The person is essentially related to the other, to fellow persons. . . . It is precisely through this mutual relationship to others that the limitations of man’s

²² Richie argues, “The great commission demands that believers make disciples, while the Adamic covenant required biological children. Consequently, spiritual parenting is not only proposed to couples considering biological children, but indeed to all Christians, single or married”(2014, 164). Cahill goes as far as to assert, “ensuring that children have families is always a greater priority than ensuring that childless couples have children” (2005, 209). After having considered the loving care that could be offered through adoptive relationships, regardless of our theological complexities and heterogeneity, Walton concludes that, “we might see adoption as a mirror for understanding all familial relations . . . ” (2016, 68).

own individuality are transcended in free, loving affirmations of the other, and the person himself arrives at personal identity. The co-humanity with which we encounter one another as people, i.e., as an aim and end and not as a means for something or other, is an important anthropological constant which looks for norms without which the whole and liveable humanity is impossible here and now. (2014, 737)

A broader understanding of eschatological restoration would necessarily have to include animal and non-human animal relationality (Feder 2017). Nevertheless, Schillebeeckx's observation remains pertinent and transcendence above the limitations of individuality is possible when we lovingly affirm the other. If a renewed ecclesiology framed through the lens of the eschaton is possible, it will only be truly recognised when there is a selfless, not selected, and loving yield one to the other. If that could be realised, then those who have been marginalised through childlessness would share in all aspects of family life without deprivation or distinction, however, when we continue to privatise children, then such divisions will remain. It was this redefinition of 'family ministry' that led Guernsey to postulate that genuine family ministry in the church consists of "the church's empowering the people of God to relate to one another as if they are family *especially if they are* (italics mine). The definition represents a movement away from a static, programmatic definition to a more dynamic relational one" (1990, 3). The relational as opposed to static and programmatic has been evidenced in these findings as respondents repeatedly voice the benefits of a shared narrative.

Until that time, we will always be the captive of what Volf calls the "strange logic of eschatology" embattled with a vision of continuity-discontinuity (Polkinghorne and Welker 2000, 12). For those who face the challenge of infertility, the embedded reality of transgression and transience will remain problematic and still overshadow us. As a result, all human life is always in a state of disruption, "our present is not at peace with our past and future. We feel anxiety about what we expect and carry the burden of what we remember,

and thus are robbed of an unattenuated joy in the present” (Polkinghorne and Welker, 274). The present reality is painful but is under redemption as is the community of which we are all called to be part. Such a covenant community made up of ecclesial siblings will share our blessings along with our pain. We cannot refuse, however, to lose sight of the hope that has been birthed into the community of faith as Moltmann contended that when divine ends take centre stage, all our ‘endings’ are reframed (Polkinghorne and Welker, 246). Surely, both PCI and the wider church must take up the challenge of those marginalised through infertility and practice theology in its purist expression as Schillebeeckx declared dogma that it “is a question of being orientated towards the grace of the future, remembering God’s promise and being active in faith and, in so doing, making dogma true. The profession of faith and dogma, after all, proclaim a future which must be realised in hope and is therefore not exclusively the object of contemplation but a task to be accomplished” (1969, 38). Particularly when that task is to re-order our sibling relationships in church, in such a way, at least for Aasgaard, where “Social dynamics are – in sense – turned into theology” (2004, 310). Perhaps, it is now time for us to make theology work for everyone and not only for some.

Chapter 7: Pragmatic Response

7.1 Introduction

Having explored various theological reflections in Chapters Five and Six, this chapter will now consider two further perceptions that require consideration, firstly, pastoral displacement and secondly, the subject of sexual identity. These two areas will confirm the perception that pastoral concern has been abandoned in order to protect the institution of marriage and by recourse to F8/M8 suggest that procreation was one way of defending a traditional understanding of sexuality. My final recommendations will consist of practical solutions that might enable us beyond the current pastoral impasse.

7.2 Pastoral Displacements

What is not in question is that pastoral concern continues to operate at the parish level. It was clear from the participants that at least some ministers were aware of the problems infertility causes. However, upon examining the PCI literature and listening to the in-depth interviews, there was a genuine perception that the wider church had failed to listen or respond appropriately to those facing involuntary childlessness. It would be true to say that a form of pastoral displacement had occurred. The agonising experience of F3 and M3 only served to demonstrate that this displacement might have occurred through neglect, ambivalence, or re-prioritisation. This couple were abandoned in their journey without correspondence or explanation. It was clear from the literature commissioned by the Board of Social Witness in 2003 that the experience of church members confronting childlessness was a deeply difficult journey, hence, the 1999 printing of *Coping with Childlessness* to offer genuine support. The Pastoral Committee's desire to establish a 'listening service' was also a very commendable way forward. To further this process, an attempt at utilising the narrated

journeys of parishioners was commissioned, written, and proofread but was never printed.

The withdrawal of this prospective publication, at least for F3 and M3, was deeply regrettable and equated to the disappearance of support and concern. The question remains: why did this happen?

It is not appropriate to query individual motivations regarding the decision not to print the material. However, it is perfectly reasonable to argue that an experience affecting so many people (as evidenced in the literature review) should have acted as a counter check to this lack of concern. It is also unlikely that anyone would have ever suggested that involuntary childlessness is not a pastorally sensitive or important issue. However, all concerns affecting the Church, vie for consideration, and, in this case, infertility lost out. Perhaps, because a new issue, that of sexual identity, was emerging that would dominate the pastoral landscape for some time to come.

7.3 Sexual Identity

Sexual identity figured prominently in the General Assembly's pastoral report of 2007. The pastoral committee was asked to consider how it should relate to and provide pastoral support for those experiencing same-sex attractions. Within a decade that pastoral query had shifted from one of concern to one of censure, only now, the questions related to the criteria for approval for baptism which inferred, at the very least, that some people were going to be excluded from the sacrament. The issue was raised at the General Assembly in 2016-17 as clarification was sought as to whether same-sex couples would be allowed to present children for baptism. The transition from concern to threat is an interesting one and may reveal something of the mind-set of Irish Presbyterianism as to how they react when they perceive a threat to their identity.

Gareth Stewart, an Irish Presbyterian, wrote a PhD thesis later revised into popular book form entitled, *The Ebb and Flow of Grace* (2019). In that thesis, he sought to examine the interplay between evangelism and ecumenism within PCI and wrote:

How Presbyterians have been perceived presents an interesting outside view. Mark Twain describes the Presbyterian as a devoted person with a concise knowledge of church law, and if misunderstood would take the opportunity to “explain it with any weapon you might prefer from bradawls to artillery.” Twain’s caricature may explain why evangelism rather than ecumenism has been more readily defined within Irish Presbyterian mission than ecumenism. The mode of delivery and the public persona of the missionary would result in a rejection from other denominations. Grace would then ebb from Presbyterian missions because of the perceived need to maintain the exclusivity of theological truth. Ecclesiastical isolation becomes the de facto position because the missionary misinterprets the rejection of their theological position. Presbyterian missionaries interpret the rejection of their theology as resulting from the plausibility of false theology. (Stewart 2019, 63)

His perceptions were evidenced in the breakdown of formal relations between the Church of Scotland and PCI in 2017. The Irish Presbyterians had objected to a report written by the CofS on same-sex relationships. This resulted in the Irish General Assembly refusing to send an Irish Moderator to the Church of Scotland General Assembly of 2017. Initially, this was to be short-term, but a vote taken at the 2018 Irish General Assembly meant that such a formal relationship was indefinitely severed, although they could still work together on matters of common interest. Further reference to the journalistic reporting of this event can be found in (Appendix V: PCI Theological Brexit).

Stewart’s observation is telling and easily transferable to the subject of sexual identity, theological orthodoxy, and practice. Stewart then concludes:

The Scottish influence continues in PCI up to the present through the adoption of the WCF (Westminster Confession of Faith) and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as “subordinate standards.” The Westminster Standards were adopted on the precedent of the Church of Scotland’s decision of 1 July 1643 to adopt the Westminster Standards as descriptive of the aims and objectives of

the Scottish Church. Grace flows from the Reformation in Scotland into the Irish Presbyterian Church. Whether grace will continue to flow to or ebb from Ireland to Scotland is debatable. The evidence seems to suggest an ebbing of grace from PCI to the Church of Scotland because of the latter's position on homosexuality. (Stewart 2019, 66)

The transition of pastoral concern regarding sexual identity then became an issue about the credibility of faith evidenced in the question of whose children could be presented for baptism. According to Stewart's observations, detectable ebb of grace within PCI may be discerned, as this new approach to sexual identity was perceived as an attack on marriage, family, baptism, and theological truth. PCI had in 2007 adopted a more combative rather than pastoral response by determining the boundary lines of possible engagement. It was this very issue that respondents F8 and M8 perceived to have led to an increased emphasis on marriage and procreation. From their perception, the theological rally cry around marriage and procreation was erected to defend orthodoxy against perceived error. Within this context F8 observed:

I have found the approach toxic. I think that people have become obsessed now with the idea that marriage is primarily for procreation. It is not just one of three things (fidelity, permanence and procreation), it is primarily for procreation. I know the only reason they are saying it is so they can argue against LGBT marriage. It is not because they care about procreation because nobody has ever offered us any support, guidance, counselling, prayer or (any help) about not having kids, nobody ever came and said, is it difficult? Is there anything we can do in the Church to support you as a couple? or anything like that. So, they are not interested in whether we have kids or not and we know that. Rather, they are interested in stopping gay people getting married and if they would just be honest and say that is all it is, I wouldn't mind. It had the reverse effect on me.

Clearly for F8, her journey involving a mix of circumstantial and involuntary childlessness has been exasperated by the church, as she believes the pastoral focus has shifted due to an emphasis on procreation as a pillar of marriage. This renewed emphasis or change of focus emerged as a response to same sex attraction, and since no member of the LBGT community can conceive naturally, the focus is apparently on biblically framed

marriages that can produce a family. Such concerns about the insensitivity of PCI towards the LGBT and emphasis on procreation as pillar of marriage had already been expressed in a national newspaper (see Appendix VI: PCI Causing Concern). F8 further echoed her concerns in relation to this matter by adding:

It is ridiculous. The experience of feeling that my relationship with **** was diminished like that actually made me, probably for the first time, really empathise with why a gay couple when the church won't accept a civil partnership as the same thing as marriage; but rather something considered slightly less. No one wants the primary relationship in their life to be judged by someone else as slightly less. That had never happened to me – until then and it hurt. I hurt enough that I thought that I don't want anybody else to feel like that about their relationships. I think the intention may well have been to galvanise opinion. I don't think it was malicious, I think it was utterly thoughtless.

Of particular note was the word 'galvanised' which resonates with Stewart's observation of the ebb and flow of grace. What began as a gracious concern over pastoral provision to those with same-sex attraction has now developed into a perceived threat where opinion, theology and practice must be galvanised to eliminate the possible risk to orthodoxy.²³ However, nuanced the perceptions of F8 and F9 were, the general response expressed during the in-depth interviews was that they had experienced institutional neglect.

7.4 The Need for a Restorative Roadmap for the Church

When analysing the data contained in chapters four and five, the expressed pain, hurt and isolation felt by many parishioners were all too apparent. Yet, there was much more to the experience of childlessness within PCI than disappointment, heartache and pain. It was clear that tensions between faith and doubt, and strength and weakness had been navigated

²³ Evidence of concern regarding a threat to orthodoxy can be evidenced in the dismissal of a professor at Union Theological College, Belfast, see (Appendix VII).

courage and resolve. In truth, the human experience of childlessness cannot be separated into distinctively negative and positive experiences, and often, these two experiences are paradoxically entwined. The experience of childlessness is neither linear nor progressive in terms of moving from a negative experience to more positive ones. Nor is it likely that one can be experienced without the other. Whatever emerges from the research, it is imperative the church hear the breadth and depth of that pain and isolation as during the research, interviewees repeatedly stressed that their voices needed to be heard.

However, it was very strongly felt that in this this Chapter dealing with practical theology, that our theology is shaped and influenced not only by the pain we have heard but also by the resilience, hope and theological insights they have shown. It is with a deeply held conviction that any practical or theological assessment contained in this chapter would, once again, have to include their voices on the way to developing a roadmap to recovery. Chapter four is a moving reminder of the resolve, strength and perseverance required to battle through unwanted childlessness. Every participant wrestled with the confusion and disbelief that childlessness brings, but they all remained within the faith community. Feeling excluded from the church on occasions had led them to retreat from it but not desert it. Just as they had adjusted to the changes in their lives, so they wanted the church to adapt in a way that would recognise and accommodate their particular needs. For that to occur, the institutional response must also involve some level of clergy recalibration, and this was noted in some of the responses made.

According to F4, clerical awareness was an important issue for her. Contemporary experiences of childfree living can encompass voluntary and involuntary childlessness, circumstantial infertility, and anything in-between or all three. Re-calibrating awareness will ensure that making unnecessary assumptions about childfree living is avoided. For ministers

and care workers to presume that couples do not require help, or that silence is just privacy and not pain, diminishes the possible effectiveness that any ministry to parishioners might have. M9 commented that:

I think it is getting to know their couple base and not to make assumptions that couples don't want to have a family. The only way churches can do anything is by talking to the couples concerned. If couples are willing to open up, then that's okay . . . if folks aren't willing to open up, then the church can't be blamed at that stage. However, I think they have to ask the questions in a more sensitive manner and not make any assumptions.

F4 also identified sensitivity around the type of language used by ministers and reminded them to:

Be careful of prayers that assume that "family" always consists of children. I think that because there is a big emphasis on family and the importance of marriage and the way things are geared within church life, as it is geared a lot towards couples... but I think often in references to families and home life, they don't often acknowledge a lot of people live on their own. I think even through preaching and prayers, we deal very much with bereavement, but not with single people.

The subject of awareness was also raised by M11 when he emphasised that "resources should be made available to ministers and elders. There needs to be greater awareness of the issue of involuntary childlessness among members of the PCI, full stop – which basically is not of our choosing." An increased awareness of this topic and the sensitivities involved especially within the church, is imperative if 'changes for the better' are to be sought out and implemented.

In the light of the parishioners' responses and after having listened to their narratives, I realised that inactivity and the general malaise can no longer continue to be the response. In the next section, I give some consideration as to what may be included in an ecclesiastical shift of perception and practice.

7.5 An Institutional Response

The neglect by the PCI shown to those experiencing childlessness was not only evident to the respondents, but the research has also demonstrated that institutional support was neither visible nor available. Ironically, as national infertility increases, concern by the PCI for those affected by it has visibly decreased. On the other hand, important pastoral issues, like sexual identity, have found sufficient space for dialogue and pastoral concern, but this should no longer be at the expense of involuntary childlessness. As a result of this thesis, a window of opportunity may emerge where the otherwise concealed lives of the parishioners will have unveiled a world of challenge all too often ignored. After having listened to their voices and recognising their appeals to the church and wider community, I will now propose some suggestions for change including:

A Listening Service: Communication and media have moved on since the PCI suggested an appropriate listening service. As listed in the PCI General Assembly reports, the PCI counselling service gives a statistical breakdown of the types of counselling provided. They reveal that no direct counselling has been given to those experiencing involuntary childlessness. These figures have either been absorbed into existing categories, or people have been reluctant to use their services. If the former is the case, then childless couples remain a hidden category. If the service is unused, one can only assume that people are either unaware of it or have chosen not to use it. It is suggested that a dedicated and confidential listening service be designed and promoted to ensure awareness and to encourage use.

Presbytery Awareness: The strategic role of the presbytery in informing ministers of training provision is critical. The PCI, working closely with the Presbyteries, could identify online resources giving ministers/pastoral workers immediate access to vital information. Raising the importance of childlessness among the Presbytery should correlate to heightened pastoral concern. The feeder mechanism to policy change within PCI comes, theoretically, from the ground up. Consequently, if childlessness is put back on the Presbytery's agenda, it should translate into improved awareness at the highest levels. The findings from this survey of the clergy and the in-depth interviews provided by this research could become the basis for dialogue at the Presbytery level. By integrating conversations regarding all forms of childlessness into existing presbytery initiatives, such as 'marriage classes', would be beneficial for two reasons. One, it would raise involuntary childlessness as a distinct pastoral

challenge, and secondly, it may prepare marriage candidates for some unexpected elements within the marriage experience. The presbytery could also set up regional workshops either as a one-off event, or occasionally incorporating the subject of infertility into marriage and family seminars.

Narrated Acknowledgement: It is lamentable that the proposed publication undertaken by PCI in 2006 did not come to print. A sensitively structured book on the lived experience of childlessness would have been built on the previous publication of *Coping with Childlessness*. Failure to do this, for whatever reason, was a mistake. By capitalising on the already existing work, the institution could have provided further support for what remains a highly emotive issue. The failure of the PCI to narrate the experiences of those contending with involuntary childlessness has only added to such parishioners' sense of invisibility. As a result, the wider church experiences a deficit in understanding what it is like to be childless in what is perceived as a family focused church. The PCI needs to resurrect their initial concerns and commission a publication that is informed by those whose lives or interests have been most deeply affected by childlessness. In the commissioning of such a publication, the PCI should widen those considerations to include other topics like marriage, procreation, singleness, and all forms of childlessness. This more extensive work needs to be framed within and emerging from the Church's deeply held theological, moral and social responsibilities. This integrated and collaborative piece of work, by necessity, should include the Doctrine, Pastoral Care and Congregational Life and Witness committees of the PCI.

Network Hubs: As respondents balanced privacy against public awareness, they wanted to feel understood, and yet, without feeling judged or pitied. Whilst wanting full integration into the life and witness of the church, they also revealed the desire to find support from others undergoing similar pressures. With technological advances and the rise of social media, the current methods of communication have the capacity to create open and closed networks. This situation provides the PCI with a wonderful opportunity to create public and private forums that can be accessed at various levels by the participants. This provision can offer them both the privacy they may wish to maintain, or layered visibility within a system of open and closed social networks. The available technology allows for a morally appropriate level of anonymity and engagement that can be tailored to each participant. The pandemic of 2020-21 has significantly increased online presence and opportunities for connection between the church and its parishioners.

Theological Training: Institutional change must also translate into theological education. The training of candidates for the ministry on vital subjects like marriage, procreation and childlessness has deeply personal and ecclesiastical significance. As part of the research, I spoke with a professor at Union Theological College and it was acknowledged that no formal space was allotted for the topic of involuntary childlessness. This omission would warrant reconsideration. During an informal conversation with a pastoral theology student, it was revealed that vital subjects, like special needs, were addressed separately in the teaching program. Any minister who leaves college better equipped to integrate those with special needs into a greater participation in the

life of the church is to be highly commended. The existence of visiting lecturers who provide specialist training in these areas is to be encouraged. This is a wonderful and significant contribution on behalf of the college. Nevertheless, a recalibration of faith communities requires both equity and opportunity for those whose voices have been disempowered and recently disenfranchised by the Church. It is not unreasonable to request that specific consideration be given to a topic of such importance that has resulted in the hurt, pain and alienation of some the PCI parishioners. In short, it is recommended that childfree living including those undergoing involuntary childlessness should feature explicitly in the teaching program.

In order for these solutions to be effective they need to be acknowledged, failure to do so will only perpetuate the sense of neglect experienced by parishioners. Yet, what is critical is that the narratives contained in this research sufficiently motivate the governing authorities *to make* the changes required. The feelings of isolation and hurt need not permanent scars but can be remedied by genuine pastoral care and provision. Such care will be the result of a church willing to listen, but it will also require the courage to admit its failures and win back the trust of those worst affected.

Chapter 8: Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter summarises the key research findings of this study and discusses the main issues emerging from the in-depth interviews.

A comprehensive review of pertinent literature, as described in Chapter Two, was undertaken thus providing an overview of the subject area of involuntary childlessness within a global context and explored social and theological implications of infertility. The review provided an insight into many of the contributory factors and negative impact of childlessness and enabled me to position the field of research. It was evident from the review that that there was a gap in the extant literature with regard to the incidence of infertility within the PCI and the impact this had on the congregants dealing with childlessness. In addition, the literature review revealed a lack of data relating to how the practice of child Baptism impacted childless couples and indeed how it was practiced within the context of a covenantal community. The lack of information on the clergy's perspective of baptism and how this has significant bearing on those with no children, only highlighted a need for this area to be explored further.

The literature implies that there is a lack of understanding, communication and guidance within the PCI community regarding the area of involuntary childlessness resulting in increased pain and feelings of marginalisation and isolation of many within the church community. Therefore, as the incidence of infertility is ever increasing within our congregations, an immediate requirement for this research was once again highlighted. The research study has explored the lived experiences of the PCI parishioners and evaluated the perceptions of clergy and laity with reference to baptism. Upon analysis of the findings, a

number of practical strategies were proposed with a view to improved practice within the PCI for the help and benefit of both clergy and congregation alike.

8.2 The Lived Experiences of PCI Parishioners

Exploring the lived experiences of the PCI parishioners contending with voluntary childlessness using in-depth interviews allowed the opportunity for the study participants to expand on their answers and present more than a casual glimpse into their experiences.

An analysis of the responses revealed those experiences to be multifaceted and provided current insights into the existence and intensity of pain within this community. There was found to be a significant level of hurt and disconnectedness experienced by the respondents from a variety of contributing factors.

The conclusions drawn from this part of the study are in concordance with those of others who determined that the sense of marginalisation and isolation proved to be of significant import, especially within the church community (1.3). The research revealed that there was a feeling of ‘not being heard’ and a belief that adequate guidance or support, be that practical or spiritual, was limited or non-existent within the PCI. These findings, substantiate the observation made from the literature review that there were limited resources available within the PCI that were particularly directed towards this area.

Therefore, having established that there was a degree of lack of communication, one of the proposed areas for change in order to try and address this was to develop strategies that would promote improved awareness, communication and interconnectedness within the PCI. These are outlined later in the chapter.

8.3 Perceptions and Impact of Baptism

Within this study, it was important that the perceptions of both clergy and laity be evaluated with reference to baptism and to investigate the impact, if any, this had on the congregational life of those contending with infertility.

Analysis of the data obtained from the laity respondents revealed that there was an overwhelming sense of sadness and feeling of exclusion when it came to Baptismal services. All of the participants reported that they had found these events difficult at one time or another and for some, being present at a baptism was so painful, they opted not to attend.

The responses of many of the participants of feeling excluded and ‘not belonging’ supports the position suggested by other researchers in the pertinent literature that the church tends to elevate the status of the biological family and offspring to significant importance and reproduction as the pinnacle of the marital bond. In this research study, the apparent biocentric nature of the PCI, where much is made of the biological family unit, not only seemed to alienate many of my research participants but seems less consistent with the teaching of the New Testament on the spiritual family and end state of all believers.

It was this view that compounded some participant’s feeling of incompleteness and being ‘less than’, a potent reminder of their inability to be able to enter into this ‘state of fulfilment’. While the participants believed that there was a general lack of awareness of the position or feelings of those struggling with childlessness, they did acknowledge that this was not necessarily intentional.

Upon analysis of the interviews conducted with the clergy on their views of the role of baptism and its impact upon some parishioners, an incongruence was found in some of their beliefs and practices. There appeared to be a lack of clear theology around their

practices which meant that often times the congregational vow was completely omitted from the baptismal order of service. Approximately half of the clergy respondents acknowledged that the baptismal service could be problematic for some parishioners, while only 14% reported that the inclusion of the covenantal aspect of baptism could be a problem. However, despite these findings, this research study postulates that it is entirely possible that these apprehensions and difficulties put forward by both laity and clergy could be addressed and overcome in order to bring about increased inclusiveness within a truly functional covenantal church community.

In view of this, I believe that a better understanding of baptism within the context of ‘covenant’ needs to be better understood within the PCI. The baptismal focus should be less biocentric and encompass the whole congregation as part of the wider church ‘family’. This would perhaps mean a revision of the PCI liturgy regarding baptism and then congregational vows should become part of the baptism ceremony of every church.

8.4 Priority Within the Church

Having previously established that there is a significant level of distress amongst a considerable number of our PCI congregants due to involuntary childlessness, the interviews also revealed, in many instances, their struggles with faith, individual purpose and role in church life. However, while the extent of the problem is noteworthy, it does not necessarily follow that the church is equipped to address such concerns or to provide meaningful support and advice.

Indeed, the results of this study, when investigating pastoral displacement, found that the support offered ranged across clergy with some reported as being somewhat aware and helpful, while others had left their congregants feeling totally abandoned. Some recognition

was acknowledged with the publication of the PCI resource, “coping with Childlessness”, however failure to print the proposed secondary, more informative pamphlet had left some couples believing that the topic had become no longer important enough to address and in shelving the pamphlet project, reflected a shelving of support.

One of the recommendations of this study would be that this pamphlet be re-examined, redrafted to include a more comprehensive analysis of the key topic and then distributed widely throughout the PCI.

As previously suggested, I observed that the doctrine reports of PCI highlight that much theological reflection and policy making is centred around marriage, family and human sexuality. It is clear that a preoccupation with these issues, has been, at least perceived by some, to be a means of protecting conventional understanding of family, often popularised in the form of marriage and procreation. The danger at least implicitly is, that if PCI is concerned that gay couples may get their children baptised then a renewed emphasis on marriage and natural reproduction will become the focus, simply because it is another defence against the formulation of same-sex relationship where currently that is not possible.

However, the New Testament has already established the importance of covenant community, over and sometimes against, biological ties. If these didactic claims are to be taken seriously as representative of the eschaton, then establishing the kingdom value of covenant bonds effectively desexualises human relationship in favour of Christian siblingship. In such a community, attention to perceived conventional moral values is still possible, but the issues of human sexuality and biological ties are no longer the focus of attention. Differences are not erased, but as said before, they are no longer what matters.

8.5 A Road Map for Change

Valuable contributions to knowledge have arisen from the interviewees, (both childless couples and clergy) expressing their thoughts, feelings and opinions on how they view, experience and are impacted by involuntary childlessness within the PCI. Analysis of the interviews revealed a number of key areas that have the potential for development and implementation into the practices of the PCI what would go some way to helping both clergy and congregants to navigate their journey together in addressing the concerns raised throughout this study.

Firstly, having established a disconnect between clergy and parishioners, there needs to be a ‘clergy recalibration’ when addressing childlessness in the church. Pastoral care needs to be more proactive in engaging with the couples in question, clergy need to be able to broach the subject with sensitivity while at the same time making no assumptions as to the reason for the couple’s state. For this to be implemented effectively, suitable resources must be made available for ministers and elders in order to handle such circumstances from a stance of being better informed and confident.

Additional proposals suggested for change that have arisen from this research include:

- Providing a ‘listening service for struggling parishioners.
- Increasing Presbytery awareness through developing marriage classes and workshops.
- Narrated Acknowledgement: PCI Publications on the topic
- Network Hubs: online networks and help groups/forums
- Theological Training: develop a better theological understanding within the area of Theological education.

8.6 Future Research

One of the main outcomes of this study has been to significantly contribute to the existing knowledge in evaluating the perceptions of both clergy and laity with reference to baptism and how this impacts on congregational life of those contending with infertility. Particular to some Reformed churches is the practice of infant baptism and never before in the existing literature has the connection between paedobaptism and childlessness been fully explored. This research has started to bridge that gap and makes a contribution to knowledge by providing new insights into the thoughts, opinions and theological perspectives of both clergy and laity with the PCI. Future Research could also examine the relationship between other forms of childlessness, e.g., contrasts or connections between voluntary, involuntary and circumstantial childlessness. The ecclesiastical silence that has surrounded involuntary childlessness may have helped conceal such distinctions. Future research could examine all forms of childlessness, comparing and contrasting people's experiences within the life of the Church.

The results of this research, whilst transferrable, cannot be generalised given the qualitative nature of the study and limited participant sample size. Therefore, further research will be required to examine and narrate the different experiences to those expressed here. Such research would in fact complement this study and add an even richer and thick description of the experience of childlessness within PCI.

From this research, it emerged that the socio-economic backgrounds of participants were relatively homogenous. It would be interesting to conduct further research to compare and contrast the experiences of different socio-economic groupings within the same denomination.

8.7 Conclusion

This final Chapter has provided an overview of the findings pertaining to the research objectives and presented key areas for further development and investigation. This conclusion highlights the implications of the research in terms of its contribution to both academic knowledge and practical theology and it is anticipated that by presenting these findings, strategies will be developed for improvement and implement changes within the PCI that will have a positive effect on the future of how the church addresses the issue of involuntary childlessness amongst its parishioners.

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Appendix I: Clergy Survey Questions

Clergy Survey Questions

1. How many child baptisms have you administered in the last 12 months?
2. In general, have these baptisms been celebrated in the presence of the family and invited friends of the participants?
3. What passages of Scripture do you read before you administer the act of baptism? (*Please Comment*)
4. When you ask the person/couple the required vows before baptism are they sourced from any liturgy, if so which liturgical form do you use?
5. If you have adapted, or created a set of vows that is appropriate to your context, can you include them in the box provided?
6. Do you ask the congregation to also make promises in relation to the parent/couple and child baptised?
7. If so what liturgical form, have you used? And can you include those vows in the comments section below.
- 8 (a) In the community celebration of Baptism are you aware of any couples, who as a result of involuntary childlessness, may find this service difficult? (Please write Yes or No).
- 8 (b) Do you think our teaching on the covenant can be problematic for those experiencing involuntary childlessness? (*Please Comment*)
9. Are there occasions when you have noticed that couples are absent during these services because they are undergoing the specific challenge of involuntary childlessness?
10. In the last 5 years, can you remember a specific occasion, that you selected the subject of involuntary childlessness as a sermon topic?

Appendix II: Parishioners Interview Questionnaire

Parishioner Interview Questionnaire

Section 1 – Church Life

- i. Did you feel there was adequate opportunity for you to get the support you needed as you experienced involuntary childlessness?
- ii. Can you describe the impact (if any) this experience has had on your relationship with your church family?
- iii. Are there any situations or relationships within church that you avoid as a consequence of infertility?
- iv. What are your emotional responses to church events like: Christmas, Baptisms and Mother's Day? How have you chosen to respond to these events?
- v. Have you ever heard a sermon directly on the subject of childlessness?
- vi. If you have heard a sermon on childlessness how did this sermon make you feel and why?

How can the Church help?

- i. How does it feel to be part of a congregation as an infertile couple?
- ii. Have you found the level of support within your church to be adequate and if so, what areas have been most helpful to you? If not, which areas of support do you believe to be lacking?
- iii. Are you aware of any resources provided by the Presbyterian Church in Ireland that both informed as supported you as you experience/experienced infertility?

Section 2 – Personal Faith

- i. Has this experience of infertility had an impact on your Christian journey and if so, how?
- ii. Can you describe any ways in which your personal relationship/fellowship or knowledge with/of God has changed during your infertility journey?

Appendix III: Response to Clerical Survey

	Town	City	Rural	Total
No. of Baptisms Conducted	88 (47.8%)	68 (36.9%)	28 (15.2%)	184 (100%)
Actual respondents	24 (55.8%)	12 (27.9%)	7 (16.2%)	43 (100%)
Did not respond				82
Total Potential Respondents				125

Note: Values in parenthesis show percentage.

TABLE B: Questions, their responses, and comments

Q. No.	Question	Response
1.	How many child baptisms have you administered in the last 12 months? Comment: None	As Above
2.	In general, have these baptisms been celebrated in the presence of the family and invited friends of the participants? Comment: All baptism were conducted outside a private setting.	100%
3.	What passages of Scripture do you read before you administer the act of baptism? Please comment. Comment: <u>90 citations of scripture texts</u> 22 times Acts 2 19 times Matthew 28 14 times Genesis 17	100%
4.	When you ask the person/couple the required vows before baptism are, they sourced from any liturgy, if so, which liturgical form do you use?	PCI: 74.5 % Other: 25.5 %
5.	If you have adapted, or created a set of vows that is appropriate to your context, can you include them in the box provided?	(Comprehensive answers are provided chapter 5 of the thesis)

6.	Do you ask the congregation to make promises in relation to the parent/couple or child baptised?		Yes	No
		Overall	90.6%	9.4%
		City	100%	0%
		Town	83.3%	16.7%
		Rural	100%	0%
7.	If so what liturgical form, have you used? And can you include those vows in the comment section below.	(Comprehensive answers are provided in chapter five of the thesis)		
8.	A. In the community celebration of Baptism are you aware of any couples, who as a result of involuntary childlessness, may find this service difficult? (Please write Yes or No).		Yes	No
		Overall	48.8%	51.2%
		City	58.3%	41.7%
		Town	50.0%	50.0%
		Rural	28.6%	71.4%
	B. Do you think our teaching on the covenant can be problematic for those experiencing involuntary childlessness? Please Comment.		Yes	No
		Overall	13.9%	86.1%
		City	8.3%	91.7%
		Town	25.0%	75.0%
		Rural	0.0%	100 %
9.	Are there occasions when you have noticed that couples are absent during these services because they are undergoing the specific challenge of involuntary childlessness?		Yes	No
		Overall	16.3%	83.7%
		City	16.6%	83.4%
		Town	20.8%	79.2%
		Rural	0.0%	100 %
10.	In the last 5 years, can you remember a specific occasion, that you selected the subject of involuntary childlessness as a sermon topic?		Yes	No
		Overall	11.6	88.4
		City	41.6	58.4
		Town	0	100
		Rural	0	100

Appendix IV: PCI Doctrine Committee Reports

2005: Public Events non-Christian religions participation (GA Annual Report 2005, 13)
Comment: The Doctrine Committee was also asked to consider the subject of “every member ministry.” Because of the extensive reach of this remit and that the Doctrine Committee felt implementation was essential, it was referred to the Board of Mission in Ireland.
2006: Multi-Faith Events (GA Annual Report, 2006, 9)
Comment: Comments have been received from 18 Presbyteries. These expressed a range of views across a wide spectrum of opinion and have raised a variety of related issues. The Committee will need time to study these responses in depth and we therefore propose to bring a revised paper to the 2007 General Assembly.
2007: The Doctrine Committee was asked to look at how ministers may engage in Multi-Faith Events (GA Annual Report, 2008, 5-10).
Comment: The Doctrine Committee has been asked to draw up principles to enable presbyteries to guide any of its members who are requested to represent local Presbyterians at multi-faith events at which members of other world religions also participate. By ‘multi-faith events’, we mean strictly such events; we are not discussing participation in inter-faith worship. They are varied and include civic and state activities, royal occasions, remembrance services, prominent public funerals, school events and weddings. These can take place north or south of the border, although their character may vary from place to place.
2008: It postponed its report of the Presence and Participation of Children at the Lord’s Supper (GA Annual Reports, 26)
Comment: N/A
2009: In 2007 General Assembly gave the Committee the following brief: ‘...To re-examine the Church’s position on children’s presence and participation in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper’ (p. 32).
Comment: This once again was comprehensively considered by the Doctrine Committee covering pages 32 to 45 in the Annual Report. The Committee recognised that participation could be taken to mean ‘partaking’ of the sacrament or being ‘present’ and participating in the act of worship whilst not partaking. The Committee discouraged partaking but wanted to suggest that churches should be more proactive in including children in the service of worship (point 5, p.41).
2010: Marriage – “Marrying in the Lord” (GA Annual Reports 2010, 23-34)
Comment: Discussed Below
2011: Marriage – “Marrying in the Lord”
Comment: Between the presentation of the report to the 2010 General Assembly and 2011 the original 2010 report had been sent to the presbyteries for consideration and had received a very mixed response. To which the Doctrine Committee acknowledged that, “the next report will be better” (p.25). In fact, on reception of the 2010 report, six Presbyteries were hostile to it, five were supportive, three were either “very bland” or “mixed”, and four did not reply (p. 27).
2012: Marriage – What does it mean to “marry in the Lord” (GA Annual Report 212, 40-49)
Comment: A long and detailed report on the question of marriage, wide-ranging and yet focused on the question, was sent to the Doctrine Committee (see above for details).

2013: The Question of Baptism (GA Annual Report 2013, 27-30)
<p>Comment: Concerns had been noted by the Doctrine Committee and point three of the report stated, “The increasing practice in the denomination of baptism by immersion appears to reflect increasing uncertainty concerning aspects of the doctrine of the Church. In particular, the Committee senses a lack of clarity concerning the teaching of Scripture that the visible Christian Church consists of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and their children” (p.27). Further in Point 16, they expressed concern that, “Finally, in light of the fact that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland accepts the Trinitarian Baptism of other communities, not least the Roman Catholic Church, the Committee is concerned that the confessional position of the denomination is currently being undermined and urges Kirk Sessions and Presbyteries to ensure that there are no “re-baptisms” of those who received a covenantal washing in infancy. ‘The sacrament of Baptism is but once to be administered unto any person.’</p>
2014: The Question of Baptism (GA Annual Reports 2014, 42-45)
<p>Comment: On the belief that immersion was being practiced with greater frequency, the Doctrine Committee was asked to consider if it was appropriate to install baptismal tanks in churches. This was refused on the basis that it would encourage a credo-Baptist theology that would undermine infant baptism. However, in seeking to address the question, they considered two further questions -is baptism fundamentally a testimony to conversion and, do the children of believers belong to God?</p>
2015: Being Human (GA Annual Report 2017, 17)
<p>Comment: Point three, stated in the report, “Members of the committee also discussed several big issues from a theological perspective that would benefit the Church. Among those mentioned were the doctrine of God, God and ethics, the Christian, the Christian world, and life view, human rights, and justice. It was then agreed that the paper entitled “Being Human” would be prepared relating to the doctrine of man (p.17).</p>
2016: Being Human (GA Annual Report 2016, 97-98)
<p>Comment: This was a promising move forward, but five years later no comprehensive report has been received, although it intends to look into the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Secular and Biblical Views of Humanity <input type="checkbox"/> Gender and Sexuality <input type="checkbox"/> The Beginning and the End: Human Life at the Margins <input type="checkbox"/> Human Rights
2017: Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith (GA Annual Report, 2017, 100-115)
<p>Comment: Refer to 2019</p>
2018: Response to the Church of Scotland Theological Forum Report (GA Annual Report 2018, 81-88)
<p>Comment: This was by far the most substantive response to the Church of Scotland raising 10 points from the Doctrine Committee, the most salient of those points will be considered in this chapter along with a submission on same-sex couples and the sacraments.</p>
2019: Doctrine Committee did not meet. (GA Annual Report 2019, 60-61)
<p>Comment: However, the Theological Engagement Task Group met to discuss the grace of God in Christ with the Roman Catholic Church. This was in the light of a document approved by both the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches called, The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.</p>

Appendix V: PCI Theological Brexit

Irish Presbyterian Church in 'theological brexit'

By William Crawley
BBC Radio Ulster Talkback presenter

🕒 9 June 2018 | 💬 Comments



The Presbyterian church in Ireland's General Assembly took place in Belfast last week

"Theological Brexit" — that's how one senior Presbyterian minister described what had just happened at his church's annual General Assembly.

And, by any standards, what the Presbyterian Church's highest governing body did this week was historic.

On Wednesday, the ministers and elders gathered in Belfast **voted by a substantial majority to, in effect, sever diplomatic relations with both the Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church.**

They agreed that they will continue to co-operate with both denominations, where appropriate, in common projects.

- **Church of Scotland moves towards same-sex marriage**
- **Madonna minister appointed as Church of Scotland Moderator**

But the Irish Presbyterian Church will no longer invite their representatives to attend its annual Assembly and will no longer be sending a delegation to theirs.

Caution against 'separatism'

It was a decision that did not side easily with the current Moderator's chosen theme for his year in office - "building relationships".

Nor with the church's recent public statements encouraging Northern Ireland's politicians to work through their differences in an effort to restore a power-sharing Assembly at Stormont.

One former moderator, Dr Trevor Morrow, in seeking to persuade his colleagues to vote differently, cautioned them against "separatism".

Another, Dr John Dunlop, in an impassioned plea, even appeared to challenge their theological right to separate.

To do so, he said, could be tantamount to flouting their biblical obligation to share in fellowship with a properly constituted church- even if they regretted the recent direction of travel of that church.

But the vote could not be avoided. This was a moment of truth for the General Assembly that now seems almost inevitable.

As I watched the result of the vote announced by the Moderator, Dr Charles McMullen, it was like watching the final, rather formal stage of a couple divorcing - with all the pain and heartache, regret and anger, that so often accompanies a long relationship coming to an end.

And this was a very long relationship.

Presbyterianism in Ireland is an off-shoot of the Church of Scotland: its first ministers arrived during the Plantation of Ulster in the early 17th century.

'Once mother church, now distant cousins'

For generations, Irish Presbyterians were proud to describe the Church of Scotland as their "mother church".

In recent years, as the cultural and theological differences between the two denominations became more pronounced and more apparent, the term "sister church" acquired more currency.

Now, the Presbyterians of Ireland and Scotland appear to be increasingly distant cousins.

The Scots have made it clear that they want to maintain the friendship, even in the face of growing disagreements.

But the majority of ministers and elders at the Irish General Assembly signalled that they'd had enough.

Those making the case for a formal separation said the theological distance between Ireland and Scotland had widened so far that it could no longer be tolerated - the Scottish church's decisions over recent years to affirm the equal place of its LGBT members.

To access the article online please follow the link provided: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-44414877>

Appendix VI: PCI Causing Concern

Naomi Long: Presbyterian Church causing 'great concern'

By Stephen Walker
BBC News NI Political Correspondent

🕒 15 June 2018 | 💬 [Comments](#)



Claims from the head of the Union Theological College that the purpose of marriage is about procreation were "insulting and hurtful", Naomi Long has said.

The Alliance Party leader said the comments by Reverend Dr Stafford Carson were "wounding".

Mrs Long, a Presbyterian who has been married for 23 years, does not have children.

Dr Carson said marriage has to do with family and procreation as well as love.

- **Irish Presbyterians vote to loosen Scottish church ties**
- **Presbyterian Church votes against gay membership**
- **Presbyterian Church in 'theological brexit'**

His comments came after the Presbyterian Church ruled last week that those in same sex relationships could not be full members of the church.

Now same-sex couples cannot take communion and **their children cannot be baptised.**

"Increasingly, I feel that there is an unwelcome coolness in the [Presbyterian] church hierarchy that makes me feel uncomfortable," Mrs Long told BBC's Talkback programme.

"When I was wrestling with the issue of equal marriage and how the state should approach this, one of the things that influenced my decision was precisely this argument, that marriage was only about pro-creation."

Speaking on 'The View' programme, **Dr Carson, who convenes the Presbyterian Church's doctrine committee,** said: "What we are saying is that to live in a same sex relationship does not cohere with the teaching of Christ with regard to marriage and sexuality.

"We believe marriage is much more than just about love. There is a whole structure.

"There is a whole purpose to marriage that has to do with family. That has to do with procreation. That has to do with God's will for us."

The former Alliance Leader David Ford told Talkback that he believed the church was moving "to the right " and that Dr Carson's comments about marriage were "deeply hurtful."

Mrs Long's and Mr Ford's comments came after Lord Alderdice resigned from the Presbyterian Church.

To access the article online please follow the link provided: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-44497368

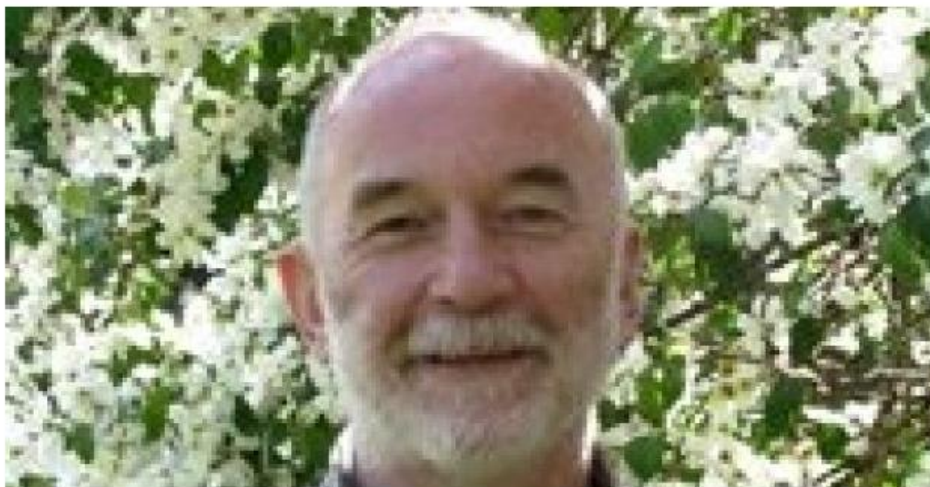
Appendix VII: PCI Professor Dismissal

Presbyterian professor at Belfast College fired by church over liberal same sex views

Appearance on BBC Talkback led to charges of gross misconduct which were upheld

© Fri, Mar 22, 2019, 01:00

Patsy McGarry



Rev Prof Laurence Kirkpatrick had been teaching at the Union Theological College in Belfast for 22 years



The Presbyterian Church in Ireland has dismissed a professor at its Union Theological College in Belfast for publicly disagreeing with the church's outright opposition to same sex relationships.



Rev Prof Laurence Kirkpatrick had been teaching there for 22 years.



The college has been providing training for the Presbyterian ministry, as well as theology courses for students at Queen's University Belfast.

At its General Assembly in Belfast last June the church decided that same-sex couples could no longer be full members and that such couple's children could not be baptised.

It also decided to loosen ties with a sister church, the Church of Scotland, as the latter moved towards approving same-sex marriage.

Subsequent to those decisions, Rev Prof Kirkpatrick told BBC Radio Ulster's Talkback programme, last June also, that he would be horrified if a student at the college was taught that a same-sex, sexually active relationship was sinful.



No comment

He also made no comment when another programme guest questioned the links between Union Theological College and Queen's University Belfast.

Following the programme Rev Prof Kirkpatrick was suspended by the church pending the outcome of a disciplinary inquiry.

According to BBC News on Thursday, six charges against him were upheld with two relating to his appearance on Talkback judged "gross misconduct", according to the letter of dismissal this week.

The other four charges it deemed fell short of misconduct and included entering the college and attending a Queen's graduation ceremony after being suspended, as well as unauthorised access to the church's IT systems.

The letter said: "Your contribution to the Talkback programme on 13 June 2018 brought Union Theological College and by association, your employer, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland into disrepute."

It continued: "Your comments on the Talkback programme had a significant and material adverse impact on PCI's relationship with Queen's University Belfast and caused hurt and damage to the faculty's relationship and cohesion."



Rev Prof Kirkpatrick had failed to gain the church's approval for taking part, it said, and that his comments during the broadcast were "unacceptable".

'Doctrinal position'

"You stated that you would be 'horrified', using that word twice, if a student at Union Theological College was taught that a same-sex, sexually active relationship was sinful, knowing full well that was the doctrinal position of your employer," it said.

When another guest questioned Queen's University's link to the college, Prof Kirkpatrick had made no attempt to defend the college's reputation, it said, while his comments had "contributed significantly to a fracturing of the relationship between your employer and Queen's University Belfast".

Last July, Queen's University began "a full and comprehensive review of the governance, management and delivery of Queen's academic programmes within Union Theological College".

An earlier, 2016, review of the college by Queen's raised concerns about the college's curriculum, which it said was "largely based on Protestant evangelical teaching with little input from other perspectives", and that it had a "lack of diversity in the teaching provision and staff".

'Post-conflict Northern Ireland'

It felt that "in a post-conflict [Northern Ireland](#), it is highly unsatisfactory that the teaching of theology is not provided across denominational lines" and further noted that there were no full-time female staff teaching undergraduates at the college.

Last December, following its latest review, Queen's University decided not to admit any new undergraduate theology students to the college in September 2019.

Among the review findings were that "a single denomination providing all the undergraduate theology provision for a research-based university is highly problematic and not sustainable in today's post-conflict Northern Ireland".

Contacted by The Irish Times on the dismissal of Rev Prof Kirkpatrick, a spokesman for the church said that "as an employer, it would not be appropriate for us to comment publicly on any matter relating to an individual's employment".

To access the article online please follow the link provided: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/presbyterian-professor-at-belfast-college-fired-by-church-over-liberal-same-sex-views-1.3834464#:~:text=The%20Presbyterian%20Church%20in%20Ireland,teaching%20there%20for%2022%20years.>

Appendix VIII: Ethics Approval Questionnaire

Dear Alistair

Ethics Application : Ethics Approval

Ethical approval is given for your research. Please note that an end of project report is required by the Ethics Committee. A brief report should be provided within one month of the completion of the research, giving details of any ethical issues which have arisen (a copy of the report to the funder, or a paragraph or two will usually be sufficient). This is a condition of approval and in line with the committee's need to monitor research. Further, it is your responsibility to inform, as appropriate, your supervisor, advisor or funding body of the outcome of your Ethics application. You should also indicate successful receipt of ethics clearance on the acknowledgements page of the approved project.

In addition, any unforeseen events which might affect the ethical conduct of the research, or which might provide grounds for discontinuing the study, must be reported immediately in writing to the Ethics Committee. The Committee will examine the circumstances and advise you of its decision, which may include referral of the matter to the central University Ethics Committee or a requirement that the research be terminated.

Information on the College of Arts Ethics policy and procedures is at

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/arts/research/ethics>.

Yours sincerely

Iain

Dr Iain Banks

College of Arts Ethics Officer

School of Humanities/An SgoilDaonnachdan

10 University Gdns

University of Glasgow

Glasgow

G12 8QQ

Appendix IX: Ethics Approval Semi-Structured Interviews



College of Arts

Research Ethics

7 November 2018

Dear Alasdair,

Ethics Application : Ethical Approval

With many thanks for your attending to the changes requested earlier I am pleased to report that ethical approval is given for your research. You should note the following actions, which are required as part of the process of research monitoring:

- It is your responsibility to inform, as appropriate, your supervisor, advisor or funding body of the outcome of your Ethics application. You should also indicate successful receipt of ethical clearance on all consent and interview information forms as well as on the acknowledgements page of your dissertation project (suggested wording: ‘ethical clearance for this project has been granted by the College of Arts Research Ethics committee [date of approval letter]’).
- We advise that you will need to make it clear to participants that there will be no impact if they choose either not to participate in the interviews or to allow use of the resulting materials. Without this reassurance, you are potentially in a coercive position towards them where they may feel that they have no choice about participation.
- An end of project report is required by the Ethics Committee. A brief report should be provided within one month of the completion of the research, giving details of any ethical issues which have arisen. (A paragraph or two will usually be sufficient – this could also be a copy of your reflective appendix, as it would be good practice to incorporate some comment on your handling of the ethical issues associated with the project there.) This is a condition of approval and in line with the committee's need to monitor the conduct of research.

In addition, please note that any unforeseen events which might affect the ethical conduct of the research – or which might provide grounds for discontinuing the study – must be reported immediately in writing to the Ethics Committee. The Committee will examine the

circumstances and advise you of its decision, which may include referral of the matter to the central University Ethics Committee or a requirement that the research be terminated.

Information on the College of Arts Ethics policy and procedures is available for consultation at <http://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/arts/research/ethics>.

Yours sincerely,

Dr James R. Simpson (Ethics Officer, College of Arts)

