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*Learning from the Church of Scotland mission initiative
'Path of Renewal' about the understanding, experience and
practice of Christian discipleship.*

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree
of Doctor of Practical Theology

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Abstract

This thesis critically examines the Church of Scotland's mission initiative, the Path of Renewal, launched in 2015 as a response to the decline and internal focus of congregations. Rooted in the organizational life cycle theory of William Bridges, the Path or Renewal aimed to guide congregations back to a more vital and missional state. The research involves reflections, recommendations and a comparative analysis with other growth-promoting programmes such as Purpose Driven Church, Natural Church Development, and the Alpha Course.

The study emphasises a shift within the Path of Renewal process, from transitioning from attractional to missional models of church to a focus on discipleship. Through a mixed methods approach, including interviews with participants, the thesis explores the theoretical and practical aspects of the process. It analyses the impact of the Path of Renewal process on participant's understanding, experience and practice of discipleship, comparing initial objectives with outcomes and delving into the distinction between membership and discipleship.

The thesis highlights positive and negative aspects of the Path of Renewal process, exploring where congregations were before, what they did during the process and what difference it made. It scrutinises the multiplicity of aims, objectives and goals associated with the Path of Renewal process, presenting key findings and addressing issues raised during the research.

As a result of the analysis, the thesis provides recommendations for the future of the Path of Renewal process and suggests directions for ongoing work to support discipleship within the Church of Scotland. The study contributes to the broader understanding of congregational life, attractional versus missional paradigms and the role of discipleship in fostering sustainable church vitality.

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Author's Declaration

I certify:

- (a) that the thesis has been composed by me, and
- (b) either that the work is my own, or, where I have been a member of a research group, that I have made a substantial contribution to the work, such contribution being clearly indicated, and
- (c) that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Introduction

Any organisation that had experienced a sustained period of decline might be expected to take action to halt that decline. The Church of Scotland has been in numerical decline for decades and this paper will critically examine the Church of Scotland mission initiative Path of Renewal and how participant's understanding, experience and practice of Christian discipleship was affected. Lesslie Newbigin, enquired:

‘why is it that we have a plethora of missionary studies on the contextualisation of the gospel in all the cultures of the world from China to Peru, but nothing comparable directed to the culture which we call ‘the modern world’?’ (Newbigin, 1987, 2)

Various departments or Committees of the Church of Scotland had produced reports for the General Assembly¹ but there had been little by way of identifying how to address the decline of the Church in ‘the modern world’. The Path of Renewal process was expected to address that issue and was initiated following consultation with missional practitioners, especially in Canada. Rooted in the organisational life cycle theory of William Bridges, the idea was to encourage congregations to move away from being attractational to missional i.e. from an internal focus to more of a focus on people outside the congregation.

Through a mixed methods approach, including interviews with participants, the thesis explores the theoretical and practical components of the process and highlights positive and negative aspects. I will analyse the impact of the Path of Renewal process on participant's understanding, experience and practice of discipleship.

The thesis will examine the multiplicity of aims, objectives and goals associated with the process and present key findings and issues raised during the research.

While Path of Renewal was instigated by central committees of the Church, many congregations have taken steps to promote change and growth in their own

¹ The General Assembly meets each May and consists of Ministers and Elders appointed by Presbyteries for that year. The General Assembly is the most senior decision-making body of the Church of Scotland, and it passes church law and sets priorities for the whole Church.

context. In the first chapter, I offer a comparative analysis of three alternative programmes: Purpose Driven Church, Natural Church Development, and the Alpha course which were chosen because they have been, and still are being, used in some congregations, and also because I have personal experience of each.

This chapter also includes discussion on what is meant by 'missional church' and its relevance today. This is significant as it was the initial thrust of the Path of Renewal process. In retrospect, there is a clear link between the desire to be missional and discipleship, but that connection was not clear in the early stages of the process.

In my opinion, the Church of Scotland does not have a good record in providing centralised, focussed training on Church growth or change management. The Path of Renewal process was a concerted attempt to engage with these issues in light of decades of numerical decline. Chapter two therefore explains my interest in the subject, particularly as a participant in this pilot process. It acknowledges that I came into the process with preconceptions about what discipleship is and assumptions about the level of agreement there would be on definitions. I explain why I chose to conduct the research using a combination of autoethnographic and phenomenological methodologies, noting the benefits and difficulties associated with each. I also discuss why I chose to carry out semi-structured interviews and set out some ethical considerations which were important to ensure the anonymity and safety of the participants.

Having explained my interest in the topic and my reasoning for carrying out the research, I explain more of the history and origins of the Path of Renewal process in chapter three. In particular, this chapter examines what the expectations of the central church were and contrasts that with what it was actually like as a participant. Participants suggest that there was a change in direction after a few months of the process from 'missional church' to focus more on discipleship. Whilst not recognised to the same extent by staff members and other leaders in the process, this proved to be a significant moment and I return to this in the following chapter.

This chapter identifies the different sections of the process proposed by Bridges (Bridges 2009, 78-82) and shows the relationship to the Path of Renewal process. I also set out the assessment criteria for selection to participate in the process, noting that the process relied heavily on the participation of ministers. There is consideration of the confusion caused by the provision of different sets of aims and objectives to participating congregations, and an initial discussion on discipleship which is taken further in the next chapter.

I close chapter three giving some personal reflections on my experience of the process.

Chapter four follows on from the thought that the focus of the Path of Renewal process had changed from missional to discipleship, therefore, I examine different understandings of discipleship. I consider the relevance of the research for the Church of Scotland. I accept a definition of discipleship and reflect on the fact that some participants struggled with the word disciple, let alone agreeing the meaning. Finally, I critically examine a model presented by the leaders of the Path of Renewal process as one participants should consider using. Based on Mike Breen's book, *Building a Discipling Culture (2011)*, I consider the benefits and difficulties of missional communities and discipleship groups, or 'huddles'. My hope, expressed at the end of the chapter is that the church will reclaim discipleship, not just as a concept, but a lifestyle.

Collation of and reflection on responses by participants occurs mainly in chapter five. It is important to assess various aspects of participating ministers and elders, and of the congregations they represent. At the commencement of the process, the congregations represented had four ministers who were less than two years in post, five were between five and seven years in post, and three were more than ten years in post. During the three years of the process, the minister of one participating congregation left the denomination and four others moved to a new charge. As noted in chapter three, the process was weighted to congregations that had already experimented with change and were willing to try new things. It was not a surprise that all of the participants stated they wanted things to change. There was a degree of difference in how participants chose, or were invited into, their group. Frequency and content of local meetings was also significantly different, consequently it became apparent that

the more participants invested in the group, the more they got out of it. I also address the question of success of the process. It was designed to bring cultural change and most respondents suggested that had not been achieved, however, there was a belief among participants that it would bring lasting change within the participating congregations. One of the key difficulties expressed was the institution itself. Church structures and procedures were considered to have a detrimental effect on discipleship and change.

Chapter six examines the outcomes of the process as understood by the participants. It is important for any new process to have clear objectives and success criteria. The Path of Renewal process did not have either of those, in fact there were multiple versions of aims, goals and outcomes and that proved problematic in being able to identify if the process had been successful. In the chapter I examine, compare and contrast the different expected outcomes and assess whether or not they have been achieved. I return to the programmes mentioned in chapter one to contrast the Path of Renewal process with Purpose Driven Church, Natural Church Development, and Alpha. I argue that one of the aims and objectives was never achievable, some have been partially achieved and some were fully achieved. In addition, I argue that the success of the process was in things that cannot be easily measured: collegiality, encouragement and support.

In the final chapter I set out my key findings from the research relating to: endorsement by the national Church; effort expended affecting outcome; collegiality; and, expectations of and on ministers. To sum up the research, I asked the question, "What have I learned from the 'Path of Renewal' process about participants' understanding, experience and practice of Christian discipleship?" I lay out some key conclusions, starting with the fact that the process was not designed around discipleship. Having shifted focus the process did highlight issues around the use and understanding of the word itself. I believe the Church of Scotland needs to recover the word and practice of discipleship. I further argue that the Path of Renewal process should not be stopped but should be enhanced to promote discipleship across the Church. There is a lot of talk about discipleship in the church but no concerted action, without which, I believe, the Church will continue to decline.

1 Chapter 1 – Congregational life: attractional or missional?

This chapter will consider the Path of Renewal process and compare it to other church growth programmes: Purpose Driven Church, Alpha and Natural Church Development, highlighting differences and similarities. I will discuss the concept of a congregation being ‘attractional’ or ‘missional’, what those terms mean, and consider whether there are benefits to becoming missional.

In 2015, the Ministries Council of the Church of Scotland, along with the Panel on Review and Reform, proposed and instituted a new process to encourage and enable congregations to consider whether they were effectively engaging with their communities and, if they were not, what steps they might take. In order to facilitate the process, the central committees of the Church of Scotland would provide training and resources. This was the Path of Renewal process.

Initially, the central strand of that training was the consideration of the differences between attractional and missional paradigms of the church. In this context, attractional is variously understood as a congregation organising activities and services to draw people into what is being offered, being a group people will want to belong to, and seeking then to incorporate them into existing structures². This stands in opposition to the supposed freedom, flexibility and outward focus of a missional congregation in which believers find ways to ‘live like Christ’ in their everyday lives (Roxburgh and Romanuk 2011, 3-34)³. In 2015 I was minister of a Church of Scotland congregation on the Clyde Coast, and my experience was of a congregation almost entirely attractional in practice. Most of the activities focused on getting people to the Sunday morning service or other activities that were provided by the congregation, to the extent that congregational health, in large part, was determined by the numbers attending the Sunday morning service. The main question for me was if it would be possible to take an existing attractional congregation and lead them to

²Online articles by Blocksom, Guin and Williams (Blocksom 2015, Guin 2011, Williams 2012, 2), are a few examples of such thinking.

³ Other examples of similar missional writing include Bosch, Breen and Porter among many others (Bosch 1999, Breen 2011, Porter 2005).

become missional. However, that simply opens up other questions, e.g. even if you can become missional, should you? Can you not simply improve your existing practices? Is it up to the minister to lead that process? What difference will it make in the long run?

I intend to reflect on these distinctions and discuss whether a decision needs to be made between attractional and missional practices or if a combination of the two is possible. I will also consider whether the 'Path of Renewal' process is simply another church growth process, similar to Purpose Driven Church, Natural Church Development, or the Alpha Course, or if it is somehow different. I have chosen these programmes for several reasons: my personal experience of them within congregations; they all suggest that, if followed properly, growth will result; and they are all programmes which a congregation 'buys into'.

One difficulty associated with this process is that much of the written material regarding missional church comes from a North American culture which is very different from my situation, and it is not always easy to relate directly to theories, examples and outcomes.

1.1 Why Practical Theology and not another 'ology'?

When explaining to church members what I was studying and that it was in the area of practical theology, the most common response was, "What is that?" The 'that' in question is practical theology. I am not alone in finding it difficult to explain. Veling observes (2005, 3), 'There is an inherent difficulty in explaining practical theology' while for Ballard and Pritchard (1996, 9), 'practical theology is problematic'. Indeed, 'for some, practical theology is not a real theological discipline' (Ballard and Pritchard 1996, 9). Macallan and Hendricks quote from Jacob Firet, "whatever good things may be said about, and from the perspective of, practical theology, it does not really have a clear image of its own" (Macallan and Hendricks, 13).

Volf records his disquiet at the question, 'But what does that have to do with real life?' during his lectures on systematic theology (Volf and Bass 2002, 245). In this case, the 'that' is theology. This disquiet is congruent with the idea that

theology has to do with the big questions about God, faith and life, while practical theology is about how to apply our beliefs to the 'real world' (Veling 2005, 5). Veling further argues that this understanding reflects the division of theology into systematic and pastoral, where systematic theology is the locus for theoretical study and pastoral theology is how it is applied to the church and the wider world. Volf agrees, arguing that the distinction goes as far back as Aristotle, for whom the goal of theoretical science is truth, and the goal of the practical sciences is action (Volf and Bass 2002, 245-6). He suggests that academics sometimes exacerbate this division and thereby encourage a false distinction by their choice of topics, focussing on what are perceived as the 'great theological themes' and their conceptual difficulties (Volf and Bass 2002, 246-7). This, he argues, is partly a result of increased specialisation.

Dingemans argues that the expression 'practical' theology is not the opposite of 'theoretical' theology; instead, it stands for a theoretical or theological approach to practice (Dingemans 1996, 83). Heitink understood the shift towards incorporating the social sciences and defined practical theology as, 'theology in the way the church functions' (Heitink 1999, 49). This was written at a time when the emphasis in practical theology was extended from the functions of a pastor to the functions of the church as a whole (Dingemans 1996, 84)

Dingemans contends that from the mid-1970s, a change occurred in the area of practical theology, particularly in Europe (Dingemans 1996, 83). This change came because practical theologians - who had studied the bible and church doctrines before applying their results to the practice of the church - began, under the influence of social studies, to start their investigations into practice itself (Dingemans 1996, 83).

For me, the question is this: why should my study be considered an exercise in 'practical theology' and not fall within missiology or ecclesiology, which are established academic disciplines? Is practical theology more than simply applying what I can learn from these areas? Miller-McLemore observes that 'practical theology has grown to such an extent that there is a serious need to clarify its emerging uses and contributions' (Miller-McLemore 2012, 12). She then works with some examples of practical theology: 1) reflection on faith in everyday life by the individual; 2) church workers reflecting on the Christian content of their

work; 3) academic practical theology and research; 4) the reflections on the first three areas by professional practical theologians. What becomes clear is that all these areas are understood as a continuum where the various parts interact with each other.

My question stems from my practical concern for the members of my congregation as we try to find a way to halt the decline we have experienced over the last few years and to try to stimulate growth in numbers. I appreciate that this is not an easy task, but there is a wealth of academic research we can draw on to help make good decisions. The other concern is that this is not a single-issue problem: it involves thinking about the structure and function of a congregation; relevant practices in the area of church growth and health; congregational studies, and the management of change within a congregation. All of these come within a faith framework, and our understanding of that faith and how it has shaped and continues to shape our practice places the question clearly in the area of practical theology - it is not simply ecclesiology, missiology or another specific area of study, instead it includes a range of areas. I agree with Ballard and Pritchard that the explicitly theological task of the practical theologian is

‘to participate in the theological reflection which brings together the living reality of the gospel with the issues, experiences and present existence of the church and the world’ (Ballard and Pritchard 1996, 34)

They then sum up, quoting John de Gruchy (De Gruchy 1987, 55):

‘The real theological task is... to enable the community of faith critically to understand the faith and to express answers to the questions: Who is God? Where is God to be found today and what does this God require of us here and now? The academic theologian may well provide resources for answering these questions. But it is the practical theologian within the community of faith who has to help the community day by day and week by week discover answers in relation to the praxis and witness of the church in the world and so help it find the direction which enables it to be faithful to its task.’ (Ballard and Pritchard 1996, 38)

As a minister and student this statement sums up exactly where I am in relation to my congregation and community. People are searching for answers to the ‘big

questions' of life and there are many excellent academic sources to which I could, and often do, turn for answers. However, my experience is that in whatever, often difficult, circumstance someone finds themselves they are not looking for subtly nuanced academic argument but something more straightforward and helpful.

1.2 The Path of Renewal Process

Much has been made both in the media and within the Church of Scotland itself about the decline in membership, something that is familiar across the Church spectrum in Scotland: a 24% drop in church membership across Scotland from 851,484 members in 2008 to 645,176 in 2015 is significant (Brierly 2016). In 2015 the Church of Scotland produced statistics for its annual General Assembly showing that Church of Scotland membership had fallen by nearly 32%, from 553,248 in 2003 to 380,163 in 2014, with an associated decline in the number of ministers. The Church of Scotland has carried out various pieces of research between 1968 and 2008, including, a survey of church membership in Falkirk in 1968, and an exploration of the economics and finance in the 1970s, a lifestyle survey in 1984, surveying ministry among young people in 2000, stress in the Ministry in 2002, and the attitude of schoolchildren to religion and church in 2008 (Brierly 2003). The research has been supplemented by initiatives such as the Parish Development Fund, Emerging Ministries Fund, 'Go For It' fund, and a Pioneer Ministry Pilot as the Church of Scotland has attempted over the years to halt the decline in membership, but this has had limited success. There has been a mix of attempting to renew existing church communities and founding new church communities. Path of Renewal falls in the former category.

Further reported drop in membership at the 2016 General Assembly and doom-laden projections for the future (Dhaliwal 2015, Robertson 2015, Office 2016a, b) of the Church of Scotland prompted the new Church of Scotland process, Path of Renewal. The thinking was based on work by Bridges (Bridges 2009). Bridges is not a church consultant or an expert in missiology, rather his focus is change management.

Other programmes have been touted over the years as ‘the one’ to promote church growth and it is my intention to consider three of these: Purpose Driven Church, Natural Church Development and the Alpha Course⁴.

1.3 Purpose Driven Church

The book Purpose Driven Church was subtitled ‘Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission’ (Warren 1995). It was written as the move from church growth to church health was beginning and Rick Warren offers a defence of church growth thinking and his understanding of it in particular. Warren outlines the growth of Saddleback Valley Community Church from a few people to a megachurch and suggests that only happened because he developed it as a ‘purpose driven’ church. He suggests that the church was able to experiment with new ideas because it was a new church and they ‘didn’t *have decades of tradition to deal with*’ (Warren 1995, 28). Despite this, the principles embedded in this programme are clearly attractational, with an emphasis on providing a service aimed specifically at unchurched people in the area, commonly called ‘seeker services’ (Warren 1995, 48). Almost as if to pre-empt the objections of those who disagree with his thinking, he gives 8 myths levelled against his and other large and growing churches and provides answers to refute them. He gives five dimensions of a healthy church as:

- Churches grow warmer through fellowship.
- Churches grow deeper through discipleship.
- Churches grow stronger through worship.
- Churches grow broader through ministry.
- Churches grow larger through evangelism.

He argues that church growth is the natural result of church health, where health is understood to occur when ‘*the message is biblical and the mission is balanced*’. Get that right argues Warren, and growth is guaranteed (Warren 1995, 49-50). He suggests that his church has not grown at the expense of other churches and that 4000 out of 5000 members were converted and baptised in the church but gives no evidence to support the claim, and makes no mention of where the other 1000 came from? He addresses the idea that a church that is

⁴ I have chosen these because I have had personal involvement as a leader in congregations that have tried to adopt one of these approaches.

growing and attracting people must have watered down its message and accepts that some have done that but that his church has not and is simply 'guilty by association'. Despite this, Warren has been subject to the very criticism he sought to avoid (Greenberg 2006, 15-16, Malloy 2010, 439-453, Taylor 2007) but much of it seems to come down to a dislike of change. Complaints such as: Changing music to contemporary rock style, thus eliminating the choir; dressing down; changing service times; changing or dropping the name Sunday School; changing the décor of the building are more to do with the author's ecclesiology than Warren's practice (Cloud 02/01/2021).

Warren traces his desire to plant a new church, therefore '*not building on someone else's foundation*' (Warren 1995, 29), to the writing of Donald McGavran, so much so that he credits one particular article with his new focus. As he read it, he

'felt God directing [me] to invest the rest of [my] life discovering the principles - biblical, cultural and leadership principles - that produce healthy, growing churches.(Warren 1995, 30)'

McGavran has been referred to as the father of Church Growth (Tucker 2006, 98). McGavran's parents and grandparents were missionaries in India, and he followed in their footsteps. He studied in the United States and attended the student Volunteer Convention at Des Moines, Iowa in 1919. Of that event he writes,

"There it became clear to me that God was calling me to be a missionary, that he was commanding me to carry out the Great Commission. Doing just that has ever since been the ruling purpose of my life. True, I have from time to time swerved from that purpose but never for long. That decision lies at the root of the church-growth movement (McGavran 1986, 53).

Although part of the great missionary era of western churches, McGavran returned to the United States and subsequently founded the Institute of Church Growth, eventually becoming Dean of The School of World Mission at Fuller School of Theology in 1965.

Ed Stetzer, an American missiologist, is critical of the church growth movement but acknowledges that it was instrumental in helping churches be more organised and focussed on growth, stating

The Church Growth Movement had its excesses and, rightfully in some cases, its critics. However, its fundamental premise was, “How can we be more effective in reaching people?” Many are surprised to discover that before the Church Growth Movement very little was written on organizing churches for growth, welcoming guests, or planning an outreach campaign. The Church Growth Movement provided great new insights (Stetzer 2006, 91).

He states that following on from McGavran it was Peter Wagner who popularised the movement in the 1970s before it became more mainstream in the 1980s (Stetzer 2006, 91). He highlights criticisms of the church growth movement: an emphasis on numerical growth over spiritual growth; an over-reliance on methodological tricks and techniques; unproven guarantees of success; and misunderstood terminology, causing ‘the relentless attack of criticisms of perceived mistakes which could not be overcome’ (Stetzer 2006, 91-94). Stetzer adds a footnote that concerns over the understanding of the word evangelism caused McGavran to change ‘his verbiage from church growth (meaning evangelism) to effective evangelism’ (Stetzer 2006, 110)

Warren became a significant player in the church growth movement in the United States. Like others, Warren employed tools from social science to analyse culture and develop strategies for reaching sceptics and seekers with the gospel. Seeing the missional task as setting goals, developing appropriate methodologies and evaluating whether or not something ‘works’ is clearly stated through the book (Warren 1995). The danger of that thinking was highlighted by Dan Kimball who argued that one of the main problems associated with ‘Purpose Driven’ churches is they slipped into a ‘one-size-fits-all, franchise, clone, mimic-the-model mentality, and in the drive to be ‘contemporary’ failed to reflect sufficiently on the relationship between church and culture, and became ‘gimmick-prone and thoughtlessly pragmatic’ (Kimball 2003, Ch 1).

In 2000 I was an elder in a Church of Scotland congregation in Thurso. The congregation had a charismatic heritage and was thought of as being ‘progressive’, mainly due to having a worship band at its ‘contemporary’ evening service and the style of the preaching. My personal experience would suggest that simply singing up to date Christian hymns does not make a congregation contemporary, however, the leadership of that congregation had a desire to

reach out to the community and decided to adopt 'Purpose Driven' as the programme that would deliver growth.

Warren uses the concept of concentric circles starting on the outside with community, and moving to the centre through crowd, congregation, committed, and core. Less time is to be spent on the 'core' (because they are already committed) and more on moving the community towards the core. Warren clearly says that context and staff cannot be replicated (Warren 1995, 67) but there is an expectation that the principles must be replicated. That simply did not work for our congregation, as it was too prescriptive, resource intensive and complex, so we moved on to the next new idea.

1.4 Natural Church Development

When Schwarz first published his book on Natural Church Development in 1996 it was a time when megachurches were flourishing. He argued that there was a difference between 'large' and 'growing' and that because megachurches seemed to work well with a charismatic leader, that was not evidence of growth (Schwarz 1996, 22). This was a challenge to then current church growth thinking which used 'numbers' to measure of growth and Schwarz is considered to have kick-started the 'church health' movement. He characterised traditional church growth thinking as 'rational, pragmatic and technocratic' and argued for his approach to church growth as:

'We have chosen to call it 'natural', or 'biotic' church development. 'Biotic' implies nothing less than a rediscovery of the laws of life. The goal is to let God's growth automatisms flourish, instead of wasting energy on human-made programs (Schwarz 1996, 7).'

The irony is that the 'human-made programs' he criticises are using the same sociological and statistical methods that he goes on to expound. Not only that but he likens traditional church growth thinking to a robot:

Regretfully, much of church growth literature in recent years comes closer in its thinking to the 'robot' model than to the 'organism' approach' (Schwarz 1996, 62).

In another description he likens traditional church growth thinking to two men struggling to pull a full wagon because it has square wheels. This is an image of

‘technocratic church growth’ thinking, or church growth in our own power’ (Schwarz 1996, 6-7). Despite this he makes frequent references to authors in the church growth tradition and his description of the spiritual gifts in the ‘gift test’ is nearly identical to Peter Wagner’s from his book, ‘Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow’. (Wagner 1994)⁵. It is possible that Schwarz is so critical while maintaining these close links because he can highlight how ‘new’ and different his model is.

The purpose of Schwarz’s NCD theory is to show how, through various practical steps, it is possible to stimulate growth in a congregation and it was meant to be a practical applicable church growth process. The main distinctive feature of the process is the application of ideas about ‘how nature works’ in relations to growth in church. He researched 1000 churches that were growing and proposed eight characteristics, known as ‘quality characteristics’ of healthy churches: *‘empowering leadership, gift-orientated lay ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship services, holistic small groups, need-orientated evangelism, and loving relationships’* and, according to Schwarz, healthy churches with these characteristics will automatically grow (Schwarz 1996, 26-45).

Each congregation that participates in the Natural Church development process carries out a survey among leaders and members to determine a score for each quality characteristic (Schwarz 2016, 1). His assertion is that a church will only be as effective as its lowest quality characteristic, citing the example of a wooden barrel which cannot hold more than the shortest spar (Schwarz 1996, 50). The least developed characteristics represent barriers to church growth but now that they are identified it offers the opportunity for the church to act on the areas which are preventing growth, without compromising the stronger areas. Over time the survey is carried out again to provide evidence of growth in each area as well as numerically. Schwarz discusses six ‘biotic principles’: structured interdependence; multiplication; energy transformation; multiusage; symbiosis and functionality, arguing that the use of these principles is

⁵ Charles Peter Wagner was a missionary in Bolivia and from 1971 to 2001 was Professor of Church Growth at Fuller Theological School of World Missions and along with McGavran was highly influential in church growth thinking.

transferable and necessary for insuring quality and growth within the local church. All of this is completed by a ten-point action plan. I have been a member of two different congregations who started out on this programme and neither got beyond the first survey. Neither congregation was satisfied with the result of the survey, one seeming to believe the result was wrong, and the other unwilling to address the issue that was their 'minimum factor'. Schwarz does not question whether the churches surveyed initially grow because they had these characteristics, or if they had these characteristics because they were growing. The language also presents a barrier e.g. 'biotic principles' and 'monistic thinking' are examples of unnecessary terms which are not easily understood and can be off putting.

I have no doubt that there are good things about the programme, particularly the practical and strategic part, and the focus on the 'minimum factor' within the congregation, however, basing his biotic principles on the parables in Matthew 6:28-29 and Mark 4:26-29 is stretching the meaning of the parables (Miller 2012, 1) Writing in 2010, Roxburgh described the *Purpose Driven* and *Natural Church Development* approaches as products of modernity, with emphases on techniques of control and predictability and argued that as we moved beyond even post-modernity these programmes no longer connect with people who have no interest in church, although they may call themselves 'spiritual' (Roxburgh 2010, CH 1-2).

1.5 The Alpha Course

It has been my own practice for the last fifteen years to run an annual Alpha course within my congregation and, while I do have questions about current branding and publicity materials for the course, I do remain sympathetic towards it.

The Alpha website describes the course:

Alpha is a series of sessions exploring the Christian faith, typically run over eleven weeks. Each talk looks at a different question around faith and is designed to create conversation. Alpha is run all around the globe, and everyone's welcome. It runs in cafés, churches, universities, homes, bars—you name it. No two Alphas look the same,

but generally they have three key things in common: food, a talk and good conversation (Alpha.org 2016).

Unlike *Purpose Driven Church* and *Natural Church Development*, Alpha is a course rather than a church growth program. The purpose is to proselytise but it also encourages existing members to be more positive about their faith (Light and O'Brien 2011, 20-21) and therefore it is claimed that churches 'grow' after running a course, or courses. For many years the publicity for the Alpha course claimed that it offers 'an opportunity to explore the meaning of life'. The Alpha 'brand' has grown to such an extent that in September 2016 there was a 'global launch' of the newly produced series of Alpha talks (Alpha.org 2016) and there are now different versions of the course available to widen its appeal. Despite that, it is considered too fundamentalist by some and too accommodating of culture by others (Brian 2006, 75-85, Hunt 2005, 65-82). It may be true that 'no two Alphas look the same' but that is more a question of geography than content. There is a strong critique of the 'one size fits all' approach (Hunt 2005, 65-82, Ireland 2000, Ch 1, Ward 1998, 276-286) because the course follows a set, and fairly prescriptive, series of talks. Holy Trinity Brompton, the Church where Alpha originated 'still offers the course four times each year with up to one thousand attending each one. The average age of participants is twenty-seven' (Stiller 2015, 393-394). It appears this has resulted in recent Alpha publicity representing people who might be interested in Alpha of different ethnicity but of that particular age bracket.⁶ Recent publicity featured Bear Grylls with the strap line '*My greatest adventure*' (Alpha.org 2016), which, although good advertising, adds to the argument that the course is more style than substance, causing Carol Brooks to ask why a church would need to pay for a course to help preach the gospel (Brooks 2014, 1). This after suggesting that the only way the gospel might be preached using Alpha is if the leader 'adds it in'. This misses the point in two ways 1) Course materials have been free for around ten years and even the newest talks and supplementary materials are available as a free download; 2) Brooks appears to have very narrow definition of what it means to

⁶ Recent publicity showed a variety of individuals sitting on a leather chair in what could be a bar or coffee shop, all of whom are 'typical Alpha participants' and, although there are people of different ethnicity represented, the message is clear – Alpha is for students, newly graduated, 'on trend' people. I have personally contacted the Alpha office to suggest that is not my demographic and ask for alternative material but to no avail.

‘preach the gospel’ and my personal experience is that there are people who convert as a result of attending a course.

So, why not choose one of these models? All three are prescriptive. The evidence of success is not clear, at least it depends on how ‘success’ is measured. Willow Creek, a megachurch that grew in parallel with Warren’s Saddleback ‘apologised’ to the wider church because research they had carried out showed that they were producing large numbers of members but not ‘solid disciples’ (Burney 2007, 1). Many missional writers would argue that the main reason not to choose one of these is because they no longer work. They are models from modernity and society has moved on, leaving the church wondering why there is decline instead of growth, and asking what to do next (Roxburgh 2010, 31-58, Roxburgh and Romanuk 2011, 4-14, Stetzer and Putman 2006, Ch 1, Tucker 2006, 4-30, Watson 2015, Ch 2-3). Is the ‘missional’ model yet another old idea - ‘go and make disciples’ - wrapped up in new clothes?

1.6 What does ‘missional’ mean for churches today?

According to Alan Hirsch, ‘missional’ is not the same as ‘emergent’ or ‘emerging’, both of which are terms that have come to the fore in recent years in relation to new ways or forms of church (Hirsch 2008, 1). Hirsch argues that the term ‘emerging’ is more to do with contextualising Christianity for a new generation than a core component of the faith. There is an argument that some ‘emergent church’ practitioners and thinkers have abandoned parts of the historic faith in order to accommodate a culture which is less engaged with traditional church⁷. De Young and Kluck argue against this perceived move and suggest a return to more conservative practices (DeYoung and Kluck 2008, Ch 1-2).

So, what is missional? It is an important question as Hirsch comments,

⁷ This is a criticism laid against Rob Bell, founder of Mars Hill Bible Church, Michigan and his book *Love Wins* (Bell 2011) and Brian McLaren, pastor, author and speaker and his book, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (McLaren 2004)

‘recovering a missional understanding of God and the Church is essential not only for the advancement of our mission but, I believe, also for the survival of Christianity in the West’ (Hirsch 2008, 1).

Hirsch, writing in ‘the Forgotten Ways’ and Christopher Wright in, ‘The Mission Of God’ argue that ‘missional’ is not the same as missionary, evangelistic, evangelism or a new way to think of church growth. It is not a style of service, and it is more than social justice. It is about the *missio Dei* - the mission of God or the sending nature of God. If Christians are the sent people of God then the church is the instrument of God’s mission in the world, however, most Christians think of mission as an instrument of the church and a means by which the church grows (Hirsch 2008, 1). But the ‘missional’ emphasis is of course not new.

McGrath states that, ‘*the growing interest in recovering the missionary calling of the church is evident from many theological works of the twentieth century, especially in the aftermath of the great World Missionary Conference, held in Edinburgh in 1910*’ (McGrath 2012, 31). Tucker writes that by this time the Christian faith had moved from Western Europe to become a global faith (Woodbridge and Woodbridge 1988, 307), and David Bosch suggests that missionary zeal during this period was motivated by four things: 1) Soteriology - saving people from hell, 2) Culture - introducing people to the Christian West, 3) Ecclesiology - extending the church or a denomination, and 4) Post-millennial theology - hastening the second coming of Christ by winning Christians in every nation. He suggests though that mission at that time became completely divorced from its biblical and theological underpinnings and was identified with Western imperialism and colonialism (Bosch 1999, 336-447).

According to Bosch (Bosch 1999, 389), it was the theologian Karl Barth who articulated the idea of mission as an activity of God himself at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932⁸. He used the term, *actio Dei*, suggesting that the ‘three in one’ relationship within the Trinity is the source of all mission. Bosch suggests that Barth’s influence was opposed to this thinking in his day because he grounded mission in God rather than in human endeavour (Bosch 1999, 372-389). It was not Barth but another German theologian, Karl Hartenstein, who

⁸ Wright agrees that it was Barth who first spoke of this but suggests that it was actually in a lecture in 1928 (Wright 2006, 62-63)

coined the phrase, *missio Dei* (Wright 2006, 62-63). *Missio Dei* suggests that God has always been on a mission and that is seen in various sending acts: the Father sends the Son into the world; the Son sends the church into the world during his ministry and after the resurrection; the Son sends the Spirit at Pentecost; and the Spirit sends the church into the world after Pentecost.

Lesslie Newbigin was a missionary in India with the Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland. At first, he was of the belief that it was necessary to import Western values and culture along with the gospel. Later Newbigin adopted a model of mission based on wider engagement without that compromise. When he returned to England in the mid 1970's he realised that the religious backdrop had changed significantly and that the missionary principles he had worked with in India were now more suitable for the UK than anything he had used before. Church missions of the sort Newbigin had originally intended were essentially the extended boundaries of European National Churches (Engelsviken 2003, 487), with their own expansion and survival a priority (Guder and Barrett 1998, 5). Engelsviken quotes Hoekendijk, who emphasised mission being God centred: '*Church-centric missionary thinking is bound to go astray, because it revolves around an illegitimate centre* (Engelsviken 2003, 488).'

Newbigin countered this claim, suggesting that the Trinitarian nature of mission implies an important role for the church. Community and communication lie at the heart of the Trinity and therefore must be central to Trinitarian mission. The call to conversion is the call to community, to be part of the Church. For Bosch, '*Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world. The church is viewed as an instrument for that mission*' (Bosch 1999, 390). In this view the whole purpose of the church is to support the *missio Dei* (Bosch 1999, 391) and Church structures exist in order to serve others in mission (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 298).

Later John Stott and Christopher Wright would come to the *missio Dei* conversation, with Stott stating:

'The primal mission is God's, for it is he who sent his prophets, his Son, his Spirit. Of these missions the mission of the Son is central, for it was the culmination of the ministry of the prophets, and it embraced within itself as its climax the sending of the Spirit. And now the Son sends us as he himself was sent' (Stott 1977, 22).

For Stott evangelism and social action were the cornerstones of mission but Wright extended that thinking to the saving acts of God in the bible:

‘A missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible will not become obsessed with only the great mission imperatives, such as the Great Commission, or be tempted to impose on them an assumed priority of another (e.g. evangelism or social justice or liberation or ecclesiastical order as the only ‘real’ mission). Rather we will set those great imperatives, namely, all that the bible affirms about God, creation, human life in its paradox of dignity and depravity, redemption in all its comprehensive glory, and the new creation in which God will dwell with his people’ (Wright 2006, 61).

In 1998 Darrell Guder asked the question, ‘*What would an understanding of the church (an ecclesiology) look like if it were truly missional in design and definition?*’ (Guder and Barrett 1998, 7) He understands ‘missional’ as ‘the essential nature and vocation of the church as God’s called and sent people’ and further defines a ‘missional ecclesiology’ in five areas:

- ‘It is biblical. Belief about church needs to be based on the bible and made explicit.
- It is historical. We must shape our ecclesiology for a particular culture but, as part of the wider church, we must be guided by the cultural expressions of those that preceded us and those with us today.
- It is contextual. The only way to be church is incarnationally, within a specific setting. The gospel is always translated into a culture.
- It is eschatological. It must be developmental and dynamic if it believes that it is the work of the Holy Spirit and is moving toward the promised consummation of all things. New biblical insights will convert the church and its theology and new cultural contexts will require a witnessing response that redefines how we function and how we hope as Christians.
- It can be practiced, or it can be translated into practice. The basic function of all theology is to equip the church for its calling. (Guder and Barrett 1998, 11-12)’

But why has the concept of the church needing to be missional become so important now, and what is the significance for churches today? In the foreword to Nelson, Hirsch writes that

‘For the better part of two decades now, missional has been equal parts buzzword and byword in the contemporary church’ (Nelson 2013, 5).

Some people assumed it was another ‘fad’ and would quickly disappear and the term became so trendy that the prelude to an article by Hirsch states:

A quick search on Google uncovers the presence of "missional communities," "missional leaders," "missional worship," even "missional seating," and "missional coffee." Today, everyone wants to be missional. (Hirsch 2008, 1)

More than a decade later it shows no sign of diminishing, in fact it is probably more prevalent now than ever before.

I suggest that it has taken on this perceived importance because of the impetus the *missio Dei* concept gives to churches that realise they are in themselves in a culture which is far from Christ. Mission is no longer to those 'far away' it is now to those on our doorstep. It must be, because of the dramatic decline in churches in the West. If churches do not confront the issue of decline many will reach the point where they are no longer viable. This has changed the focus of 'missionary work' to include our immediate neighbours. If God is already at work in the world in instances of 'common grace', and Holy Spirit is already convicting people of their need of 'saving grace' then we know that God is already ahead of us in mission where we are.

That is much easier to say than to do and, in the context of an established, traditional Presbyterian congregation it sometimes seems impossible. In fact, it is so difficult that some of the missional writers suggest that it is much better to simply start again and Roxburgh states in *The Missional Leader*:

'Those who want to discard and give up, throw away and start again with a clean slate, have no understanding of the biblical drama, the meaning of the resurrection or God's heart. Missional leadership must be about cultivating the capacity and gifts of the people who are already part of the church'. (Roxburgh and Romanuk 2011, 4-14)

However, recognising the difficulties involved in changing an established congregation he later states that 'missional' fits '*a variety of traditions, networks and affiliations but it is not suitable to lay over or add it to our known ways of being church*' (Roxburgh and Boren 2009, 700).

There was occasionally almost an arrogance in some missional thinking:

'The missional conversation has entered almost every stream of the church. The Spirit of God is moving in the church in creative,

generative ways that call the people of God to engage their neighbourhoods....' (Roxburgh and Boren 2009, 748)

It is not clear whether he is talking simply about North America or is suggesting that the missional conversation is global. Again, suggesting that God is calling people to engage with their neighbourhoods as if it is something new is not my personal experience of church. Engagement with the community has been going on for many years and it may simply be that the methods employed today are more obvious⁹. Being a minister in a Presbyterian Church I am encouraged by Roxburgh's change of heart and by the many examples given by Butler Bass of established churches that have tried new things and have grown spiritually and numerically as a result (Bass 2009, 77-218). However, I also understand that what I do in my congregation is, as Roxburgh says, using modernity's maps in a place where new maps need to be created (Roxburgh and Romanuk 2011, 21). From my own experience I would agree that we have tried to reach out to our community and draw them in to church. That was fine when the culture gap was small: when Sunday Schools were large and children knew Bible stories, generations of the same family would be in church together and being married in church was 'important'. It is simply not like that today.

Stetzer commends the church growth movement but suggests that there was *'too much focus on programs, models and plans and too little on missions'* and it is time to return to the church's missional beginnings (Stetzer and Putman 2006, 48). Just as Bridges talks about the 'neutral zone' (Bridges 2009, 39-57), Roxburgh talks of an 'in-between', a state where the old maps are useless and new ones are not available (Roxburgh 2010, 19-39). Both stress how difficult it is for everyone in that time. It is a time of transition and where people are looking for guidance and direction. It is tempting to take the 'easy' option and look for a program that promises success and quick results. Roxburgh records a story of denominational leaders who changed their titles, produced papers and set up an organisational structure because they wanted to be missional, thereby missing the point (Roxburgh 2010, 24).

⁹ Two examples although there are many more: The Salvation Army has been active in communities since 1865 and the Church of Scotland has, through Crossreach, provided social care across Scotland in Christ's name for over 150 years.

Writing in *How Change Comes to Your Church*, Patrick Keifert and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson start with an acknowledgement of denominational and ecclesial decline. Naming this the ‘new missional era’ they identify a changing cultural landscape as so significant that congregations face an existential crisis (Keifert 2019, 30). New systems, fundraising initiatives or programming will no longer suffice if congregations want to survive. Deep cultural change is required, and congregations will need to discover new ways to witness, or they will die. Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson therefore are not offering strategies, policies or procedures for maintenance or growth but practices for discernment and cultivating community.

They offer four practices for missional transformation: first, they contend that any attempt to preserve the status quo is doomed to fail. Leaders should instead help their people find that space where assumptions can be questioned, discomfort experienced and new possibilities imagined, and tried out. Quoting Richard Rohr they write:

We have to allow ourselves to be drawn into sacred space, into liminality. All transformation takes place here. We have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of “business as usual” and remain patiently on the “threshold” . . . where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That’s a good place where genuine newness can begin. (Keifert 2019, 48)

Trying and failing is to be encouraged (Keifert 2019, 34) and forgiveness sought and given when necessary.

Second, they highlight processes for denominational and congregational decision making. Keeping the rules and maintaining good order in meetings do not help congregations imagine new futures. They argue that “decision-making must be grounded more in spiritual discernment than in strategic planning and parliamentary-style practices.” (Keifert 2019, 24)

Third, what they call, ‘Dwelling in the Word’ which they say, ‘*over a significant period of time opens the conversation to Christian innovation better than any other activity we have used.*’ (Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson 2019, 80) The practice is relatively simple: share a biblical text aloud; invite listeners to find

one ‘reasonably friendly-looking stranger’; read the passage again and share your answers to two questions: 1. Where did your imagination get caught as the Scripture was read aloud? 2. As a result of listening to this Scripture, is there a question that came to mind that you would like to ask a biblical scholar?; share what you heard, not what you said.

Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson argue that the length of time spent on one passage, i.e. as much as one year, is significant. (Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson 2019, 82) This spiritual discipline counteracts the tendency they identified in many church leaders to be ‘*busy doing something... to give the impression they are making a difference*’. (Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson 2019, 83) They comment,

‘More often than not, we experience the deeply disturbing sense that church leaders anticipate the death of the church but are willing neither to say it out loud nor take the time, considerable time, to discern God’s preferred and promised future. Given this sense of time, they are very likely to do many, many good things that diffuse the energies of their church into nothingness.’ (Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson 2019, 84)

Arguing that churches change ‘by the leadership of the Holy Spirit’ (Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson 2019, 97), whilst acknowledging that many people would be suspicious and cynical about such a description, they argue that ‘*it is equally and more critically innovative in our time and place to learn the practices of trusting the leadership of the Holy Spirit*’, and that Dwelling in the Word is an effective way to do that. (Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson 2019, 99)

Finally, Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson suggest finding partners to share in the missional journey:

‘The holding environment is sustained primarily by Dwelling in the Word. Within this holding environment, the local-church leaders invite anyone and everyone who wants to participate in the journey to join. We find that both a general “you all come” and specific invitations to individuals based on their gifts and social location within the local church works best. Nothing about the spiritual journey is secret, private, or only for the right set of leaders.’ (Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson 2019, 101)

The practice of Dwelling in the Word allows the church to slow down, listen to God and each other, but includes neighbours and community partners. It allows the congregation to work out where it really is rather than where it thinks it is and this allows change to happen from the ‘outside in’ and ‘inside out’ (Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson 2019, 102).

The final chapter, ‘Being Transformed: Practices for Missional Change, draws everything together. Beginning with the analogy of white-water rafting Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson write of two tragic responses to the change that comes to a congregation:

‘First, and seldom purely attempted, we seek to not change. We deeply value what has been handed down to us. We don’t want to lose it in the ever-flowing stream. We recognize the value and virtue of deep roots but fail to do the very hard work of finding the minimal identity of those roots. Instead we hang on to everything, in effect declaring that all the practices that have successfully brought us to this place must be preserved, protected, secured. (Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson 2019, 122).

They go on to highlight ‘Six Holy Practices for Missional Change’: dwelling in the Word, hospitality, announcing the Reign of God, public/corporate spiritual discernment, focussing on mission, and readiness (Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson 2019, 128-135). While recognising that identifying how and why change happens is a mystery, they conclude:

‘This much we do know: the transformative, missional change so deeply needed by the church in our time, both local and global, will not come through quick fixes, catchy slogans, inspiring weekend speakers, and neat formulas wrapped in consulting fees. The change the church needs, which we have witnessed occurring in specific congregations, wider assemblies and denominational governing bodies, comes slowly and patiently. It takes time, because culture is being changed. It takes practice because new habits are being formed. And it takes trust, because a familiar, comfortable past must be left behind before the future can be fully discerned’ (Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson 2019, 135-136)

Dwelling in the Word was introduced to participating ministers at Path of Renewal training events with readings chosen by staff members. In the early months of the Path of Renewal process ministers were encouraged to use the same reading with their own groups. Subsequently, each minister chose their

own passage to use with their group and with the wider congregation. In my own group, some found it inspirational, and others found it difficult to keep with the same passage for a long time. All found it helpful as a way of focussing on the passage and identifying what God was saying to them as individuals. Often different things stood out each time the passage was read but, occasionally, the same word or image was 'highlighted' for a number of readings.

My experience over the last five years in my congregation is that there were people who recognised that we needed to do things differently because continuing what we were already doing would lead to the demise of our congregation. We had engaged with our community, forming links with organisations, schools and businesses and we had some success in forming positive relationships which were mutually beneficial. We had been running Messy Church for almost eight years and have been able to share communion and baptism with families who only attend Messy Church. All of this has raised ecclesiological questions: what is 'proper' church? Is Messy Church really church (especially if numbers attending on a Sunday morning don't increase)? How do we make disciples at Messy Church, the foodbank or the knitting group? To what extent can you involve non-Christian leaders and still maintain a Christian witness? Clare Watkins and Bridget Shepherd address some of these questions with regard to Messy Church, and identified an issue of commitment, in that regular attenders liked Messy Church but didn't want to be church. They were happy with the relationships they built but were willing to leave God out (Watkins and Shepherd 2014, 92-110). These are issues beyond the scope of this work, but they certainly merit further consideration¹⁰.

Alan Roxburgh, writing some years before Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson, suggests that the role of a leader is to 'cultivate a people and nourish the conviction that God's future is among them' (Roxburgh and Romanuk 2011, 145-146), and the language often used is of spiritual formation and missional practices, however, I suggest that a more recognisable word would be discipleship. There was nothing in my theological training to enable me to know

¹⁰ Research carried out by Church Army into Messy Church and attitudes towards it by attenders can be found at <https://churcharmy.org/our-work/research/recently-completed-research/playfully-serious/>

how to make disciples and that is a common theme in the literature (Hastings 2012, Roxburgh 2015, Roxburgh and Boren 2009, Starbuck 2013, Stetzer and Putman 2006, Stiller and Metzger 2010, Watson 2015, Webber 2008).

Summary

This chapter has compared the Path of Renewal process with Purpose Driven Church, Alpha and Natural Church Development, arguing that those are prescriptive in a way that I will go on to argue Path of Renewal was not.

However, there are no easy options. Missional theology as I understand it, is not simply doing new church work in the community, especially if the intent is to 'get them to come to church'. It is not about paying for an evangelist or organising a summer mission. Being missional is about every believer learning to be an agent of the Kingdom of God everywhere and every day, and I do not believe there is any single course which can teach that without also...

Further questions to consider would be: what other discipleship models are there, and do you need a model anyway?; how do you use missional and attractional models at the same time during a transition phase?; how do you make disciples outside a church context?; there are still some very large churches using an attractional model, so is it really dying?

For me, the dilemma is that I want my congregation to be missional, but I want it now, not in five years.

In the next chapter I discuss my interaction as both participant and researcher of the Path of Renewal process, acknowledging a personal bias and why I chose a particular methodology with which to carry out my research.

2 Chapter 2: Why me and why this way?

This chapter will focus on why I believe it was important for me to carry out the research, and why certain methods were chosen over others. I will discuss the benefits and limitations of being personally involved in the Path of Renewal process for this research. I will provide a brief introduction to discipleship, acknowledging that my prior understanding may leave a bias towards certain practices. I acknowledge the benefit of qualitative research and discuss issues around the interview process to ensure fairness and respect for anonymity.

2.1 Why me: who am I to research this topic?

Like many people I had not been particularly reflective in some periods of my ministry, even although it is expected during ministerial training and ongoing ministry (Wong et al. 2009, 1). Moon (1999, 196) identifies a group of people for whom reflection happens when they have a particular reason to reflect, rather than it being a more natural process. I would place myself in that group. Arch Wong (2009, 1-2) seeks to blame faculty for the difficulty students have in reflecting but, in my case, it was more a lack of effort and failure to engage meaningfully in reflective practices.

Because of the nature of parish ministry, I have found it difficult to make space for assessment of existing programmes or effective planning, let alone make time for reflection. All of these have to be given time in the diary or they simply will not happen. An early breakthrough in my growing understanding of the place and value of reflection was when I read the following sentences written by Donald Schön

".....competent practitioners usually know more than they can say. They exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice, most of which is tacit...Indeed practitioners themselves often reveal a capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action and sometimes use this capacity to cope with the unique, uncertain, and complicated situations of practice (1983, viii-ix)."

I like the idea of 'knowing in practice' as a description of what I do. I was a police officer for nineteen years before training for ministry and I quickly realised I had some transferable skills. Dealing with people in often difficult circumstances gave me a range of experience which has proved helpful in ministry, and I believe has enabled me to engage in reflection in action, or "thinking on your feet" (Schön 1983, 54). In ministry on the spot judgement is often required because you are dealing with "situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict" (Schön 1983, 50). While I found this to be a suitable means of reflection in the early years of ministry my current study has shown that it is not effective for the long term. I have learnt that reflection requires more than a descriptive narrative of my daily activities. It requires active manipulation of information (Dyment and O'Connell 2010, 229) and making connections between theory and practice "by asking questions, and by engaging with higher order ideas" (Dyment and O'Connell 2010, 233-4).

As a participant in one of the groups involved in the Path of Renewal process it is not possible for me to be 'a distant, detached and objective observer' (Swinton and Mowat 2006, 60). I was intimately involved in both the group and research, and I am likely to be influenced by the outcome of the research. I had various roles: minister to, leader of and participant in my local group; friend of some group members; mentor to two new Path of Renewal groups in another two congregations; researcher, carrying out research with members of my own group and other groups. It seems inconceivable that I will neither influence, nor be influenced by, engaging in the research (Northway 2000, 392).

2.2 Why research this way?

As a minister, I have a vested interest in making more disciples. My main role is to encourage and develop discipleship among members of my congregation, and the wider community. This has, for me, been a significant focus during my involvement with the Path of Renewal process, but it also something I have 'understood' since childhood as an essential for faithful Christian living. For me, being a disciple is an active process of developing a relationship with God, or 'following Christ', and that discipleship and 'following Christ' cannot be used synonymously as ways of 'thinking and speaking about the nature of Christian life'

(Longenecker 1996, 1). Thinking and speaking does not, necessarily, include action.

I have been taught this way of thinking since childhood and I am conscious that I bring this particular understanding of discipleship to this research. I have been working with a group of people from my congregation, and we have spent a considerable amount of time reading and reflecting on issues of discipleship, but I now realise that I assumed other group members not only understood discipleship in the same way I did, but also agreed with me. Consequently I was disturbed to find a reluctance to identify as a disciple among the group members. My explicit bias is that I expect Christian faith to have a practical effect on lifestyle and attitudes, but particularly in relation to increased bible reading, prayer and involvement in church life. I realise I have linked discipleship with these particular practices, and I now realise that there are other aspects to discipleship which I have ignored.

It is important in assessing the Path of Renewal process to understand if participants have any prior understanding of the words disciple or discipleship, and if they associate particular attitudes, practices or behaviour with those words. Preconceived negative associations could prohibit involvement, or full participation, in the process. It is also important to assess understanding of the words at the conclusion of the formal timeframe of the process.

2.3 Qualitative or Quantitative research?

The best evidence comes from good research, and good research can appear in many different forms (Remler and Van Ryzin 2015, 3). Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in terms of the data it produces and the form of analysis it employs. In terms of data, qualitative research involves different kinds of non-numerical data e.g. interviews, written texts and documents, visual images and case studies. Qualitative research may involve the use of instruments to measure or record numerical data which represent various characteristics, behaviours or attitudes (Remler and Van Ryzin 2015, 61). Qualitative research relies more on different methods of interpretation because it is dealing with

spoken or written language which has to be interpreted to be understood. It would be possible to carry out qualitative research on a subject that includes emotions or beliefs - it is not the topic that makes it qualitative or quantitative, 'it is the nature of the data and methods of analysis' (Remler and Van Ryzin 2015, 61). Because I am researching lived experiences I will be relying on non-numerical data which will need to be interpreted, therefore I will be conducting qualitative research.

Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie (1998, 95) assert that research usually consists of four stages:

Data collection

Data analysis

Interpretation

Use of data collected from the study and use of data collected by others.

Any good research starts with the selection of the topic, problem or area of interest as well as the paradigm (Creswell 1994, 8). Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 157) define a research paradigm as 'a basic set of beliefs that guide action', dealing with first principles, 'ultimates', or the researchers worldviews. According to Creswell (1994, 96), a researcher's epistemology is their theory of knowledge, which helps to decide how the phenomena will be studied. My epistemological view is that: a) data are contained within the lived experiences of people that are involved in participating in the Path of Renewal process; b) in order to understand and learn from that data I must engage with those people.

There are many competing paradigms which are used in qualitative research - positivism, post positivism, critical theory, feminist theory, action research, queer theory etc. but they do not operate in isolation (Savin-Baden and Major 2012, 135) and as Denzin and Lincoln note:

As the field or fields of qualitative research mature and continue to add both methodological and epistemological as well as political sophistication, new

linkages will, we believe, be found, and emerging similarities in interpretive power and focus will be found (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 97-98).

I excluded some options fairly easily e.g. positivist and post positivist were ruled out because of their denial of the influence of values (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 99) and the assumption of a single verifiable truth or a single reality. According to Swinton and Mowat, qualitative research “takes human experience seriously and seeks to understand and interpret that experience in a variety of ways” (Swinton and Mowat 2006, 31). Having considered the options and how best to understand the experience of Path of Renewal participants, I have chosen to use a combination of autoethnographic and phenomenological approaches.

Autoethnography is defined as a research method that employs the researcher’s personal experiences to describe and analyse cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences (Chang, 2008, 38). It involves writing about the self while being immersed in a cultural context, thus combining the inward focus of autobiography with the outward focus of ethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, 273-290). Denzin and Lincoln argue that Autoethnography has been shaped by postmodernism and poststructuralism, which challenge naïve the notions of objective truth and emphasize the role of language, power, and narrative in shaping reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 120). This method acknowledges that research is influenced by the researcher’s position relative to the study and personal experiences, thus embracing subjectivity as a valuable component of scholarly inquiry (Spry, 2001, 706-732).

I have engaged with the work of Rev Jane Denniston who has also undertaken doctoral research into Scottish Church experience (Denniston 2018, 49), and I would echo her acknowledgment that we bring our own experience and involvement into this kind of research. To that end, the interviews I carried out served to both reinforce and challenge my view of the Path of Renewal process. According to Peter McIlveen,

Autoethnography entails writing about oneself as a researcher-practitioner, but it is not the same as autobiography in the literary sense. It is not simply the telling of a life—not that doing such would be simple. It is a specific form of critical enquiry that is embedded in theory and practice (i.e., practice

as a researcher and/or career development practitioner) (McIlveen 2008, 15)

A central tenet of autoethnography is reflexivity, which involves a critical self-examination of the researcher's role and its impact on the research process. Reflexivity allows researchers to acknowledge their biases and the ways in which their identities influence their interactions with the cultural phenomena under study (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, 733-768). Autoethnography often utilizes narrative and storytelling as methods of conveying research findings. These narratives are not merely anecdotal but are systematically analysed to provide insights into cultural and social dynamics (Bochner, 1997, 418-438). The use of personal stories enables researchers to connect with audiences on an emotional level, making the research more relatable and impactful (Ellis, 2004, 22).

One of the primary strengths of autoethnography is its ability to provide rich, contextualized data. By drawing on personal experiences, researchers can offer deep, nuanced insights into cultural practices and social phenomena that might be inaccessible through more traditional methods. According to Tessa Muncey (2010, 79), this depth of understanding is particularly valuable in exploring marginalized or stigmatized communities where insider perspectives can shed light on hidden aspects of cultural life but it is also highly relevant to research into any more specialised or less documented communities such as communities of practice within Christian denominations

Autoethnographic narratives can evoke strong emotional responses from readers, enhancing the impact and accessibility of the research (Ellis, 1999, 669-683). The personal nature of autoethnography makes it more engaging and relatable, which can foster a greater connection between the researcher and the audience. This emotional resonance can also facilitate a deeper understanding of the subject matter, as readers are more likely to empathize with the experiences being described (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, 126). However, one of the main criticisms of autoethnography is its inherent subjectivity and potential for bias. Critics argue that the reliance on personal experiences can lead to a lack of objectivity and generalizability (Anderson, 2006, 373-395). The introspective nature of autoethnography may also result in self-indulgent or narcissistic

narratives that prioritize the researcher's perspective over broader cultural insights (Atkinson, 1997, 325-344).

On the other hand, Autoethnography allows researchers to take control of their own narratives, thus addressing ethical concerns related to representation and power dynamics (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, 273-290). By writing about their own experiences, researchers can avoid the ethical pitfalls of speaking for others and instead offer an authentic voice to their own stories, something particularly significant for researchers of groups who have historically been underrepresented in academic discourse (Holman Jones, 2005, 763-791). While autoethnography can address certain ethical concerns, it also raises unique ethical dilemmas. Writing about personal experiences often involves discussing the lives of others, which can lead to issues of consent and confidentiality (Tolich, 2010, 1599-1610). Researchers must navigate the ethical complexities of revealing personal and potentially sensitive information about themselves and others (Etherington, 2007, 599-616).

Creswell (Creswell 2013, 134) argues that where a need exists to know more about a particular phenomenon and the common experiences of individuals with the phenomenon, a phenomenological approach should be adopted. The advantages of the phenomenological approach are: it provides the option to look at change over time; it is useful in helping to understand experiences and meaning; is able to adjust to new ideas and issues as they emerge; and, gathered data is seen as natural rather than artificial. Disadvantages of the approach are: gathering data can take up huge amounts of time and resources; analysis and interpreting data may be difficult; policy-makers may be less inclined to act on the findings (Savin-Baden and Major 2012, 219, Creswell 2013, 149).

2.4 Interviews: the why and the how

The phenomenological interview is the primary tool in phenomenological research. It is not the only tool though and there are other means by which data could be obtained, however, given its importance it was clear that interviews would play a part in the research and, according to Savin-Baden (2012, 357),

'interviews are the most common method of gathering data for qualitative research and are an integral part of most of the research traditions.' The interview needs to be carried out in such a way that it is as natural a conversation as possible (Remler and Van Ryzin 2015, 66).

There are different types of interview available to a researcher: structured, semi-structured, unstructured and informal. In each of these the interviewer aims to be as natural and friendly as possible in order to build a rapport with the interviewee. The more relaxed the interviewee is the better as the interviewee's responsibility is 'to share something from his or her perspective or experience' (Savin-Baden and Major 2012, 358), and that is easier when you are relaxed and comfortable. Structured interviews follow a script with each interviewee being asked the same questions, using the same words, in each interview. Such standardisation of questions across interviews allows for the collection of common data across a range of interviews and is particularly useful in limiting the variation in questions posed. One strength of the approach is that such interviews are likely to produce consistent data, making comparison across respondents easier, and it makes replicating the study easier. It also means that the interviewer only needs to follow the instructions and does not require the degree of skill needed for other types of interview (Savin-Baden and Major 2012, 359). The limitation is that it is not easy to explore unanticipated issues that arise during the interview. This limitation is so significant that I did not use structured interviews for this research.

Semi-structured interviews also have some pre-set questions, and the interviewer has a protocol covering topics in a particular order, but this type of interview allows the interviewer to change the order as appropriate and even ask additional probing questions. The tendency in semi-structured interviews is to move from the general to the specific with the interviewer able to probe for more information and follow ideas that arise, but still within the overarching protocol. Questions should be open-ended enough to allow the interviewee to express their perspectives on a topic. Semi-structured interviews are useful when there is only one opportunity to interview someone. One of their strengths is that they allow the researcher to decide how best to use the time available and maintain focus in the interaction. The weakness of semi-structured

interviews is that they don't always provide the interviewee the opportunity to offer their own unique perspective (Savin-Baden and Major 2012, 359). Despite this potential limitation I chose to use semi-structured interviews.

Unstructured interviews, unsurprisingly, have no structured protocol. Of course, there is still a goal and plan in mind, but most questions arise from the context and are open, requiring a broad response to enable a conversation about a specific topic. It is

a conversation between researcher and informant focussing on the informant's perception of self, life and experience, and expressed in his or her own words. It is the means by which the researcher can gain access to, and subsequently understand, the private interpretations of social reality that individuals hold (Savin-Baden and Major 2012, 359)

Unstructured interviews are used when the researcher has a deep understanding of the topic and has a clear agenda, while staying open to revising their ideas based upon their results. They require talking with interviewees, often on multiple occasions and at length. The strength of this approach is that 'it allows the interviewer to test preliminary understandings while remaining highly responsive' (Savin-Baden and Major 2012, 360). Unstructured interviews may also serve as a step in developing more structured interview guides. There are two main weaknesses of this method: they take large amounts of time; data gathered from each interview will be different and may not be comparable with others. Because of the variety of participant locations, time constraints and my quite narrow focus on the relationship between the process and discipleship I decided not to use unstructured interviews.

Informal interviews require the researcher to talk with people informally and without a structured protocol. Conversations are not recorded, and the researcher has to rely on memory and informal notes. If done early in the research process its strength is that it can uncover new topics or issues. Respondents may view the interview simply as a conversation, which may make them more open and willing to speak more freely. The weakness is that 'data are not recorded and transcribed verbatim, the researcher's memory is not perfect and that data across respondents are unlikely to be comparable' (Savin-Baden and Major 2012, 360).

I chose to carry out face to face interviews where, as far as practicable, we shared the same physical space, however, the geography of the Church of Scotland congregations involved in Path of Renewal was a limiting factor. It was impractical to suggest a series of ongoing unstructured interviews with participants in Shetland or Caithness and expect us to be able to physically meet together. It may have been possible to meet once at the start but other than that it seemed unlikely. That meant a decision had to be made either to ignore people in more remote areas, or to decide that a compromise was possible, even if not ideal. There are technological means of communicating which I considered would be appropriate e.g. telephone interviews. Savin-Badin and Major (2012, 362) argue that phone interviews are appropriate where:

Interviewee social cues are not critical information sources

Interviewer has a small budget and limited time for travel

The research site has closed or limited access

Standardisation of the interview situation is not important

Anonymity is required or requested.

Social cues are not critical for my research; I had no budget and limited time; I did not have one particular site to work from as people were located in different places; standardisation of the interview situation was not important for me and anonymity would have been respected if requested, but it was not required. So, telephone interviews were a possibility although I did not utilise them.

Email was another alternative, however, it is asynchronous and this could have slowed down the flow of ideas. It is dependent on the interviewee being willing to take time to engage with the ongoing conversation. Again, I did not utilise this option other than to arrange times and venues.

Because online conferencing provides the opportunity to see the other person and gather visual clues, allows for real-time synchronous conversation and

mimics face-to-face interviews with many of its advantages, I carried out one interview using this method.

2.5 Ethical concerns

Qualitative research involves interaction with individuals e.g. during unstructured interviews a rapport builds, trust builds, and the interviewee might open up in very personal ways. It is vital that interviewer and interviewee understand, in advance, how that situation will be dealt with in order to protect both. Some scholars suggest a need for a code of ethics for qualitative researchers but Savin-Baden and Major (2012, 332) argue that ethics considerations are 'not a 'once only' event, a procedural thing to be overcome' but that 'there is a dailyness of ethical work'.

In order to ensure ethical conduct in my research, I made use of informed consent, recognising and agreeing with Savin-Baden and Major (2012, 328) that neither the participants nor I fully understood what had been agreed to. Bailey (1996, 8) cautions that deception may be counter-productive and he further observes that deception might prevent insights, whereas honesty, coupled with confidentiality, reduces suspicion and promotes sincere responses. Based on Bailey's (1996, 11) recommended items, these are the main items I agreed in order to gain informed consent from participants:

- That they knew they were participating in research and that their rights and dignity would be respected and protected.
- The purpose of the research and that the worth and value of it outweighs any risk or harm to participants or researcher.
- The procedures of the research.
- The interview would be recorded (and by what means) and that it will be stored securely.
- The voluntary nature of research participation.
- The subject's right to stop the research at any time.
- The procedures used to protect confidentiality and that preferences regarding anonymity will be respected.
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- Any conflicts of interest or partiality must be made explicit.

As a researcher, I ensured that everyone involved in the research was treated fairly and with respect, including myself. I had hoped, where possible, to meet for a face-to-face interview and was able to achieve that for most but geographical considerations meant that one interview was conducted by Apple Facetime. Because I could not use one fixed location for interviews, I was less able to control the environment of each one and on one occasion that proved problematic. All participants were asked to identify a space which they knew and were comfortable in, preferably a private space in a public place, to ensure the safety of all participants while maintaining an element of privacy. Most were in a space in the participant's church with the group interview carried out at a retreat centre. One participant asked to meet at a local coffee shop, however, this resulted in a poor-quality recording due to the level of background noise.

In determining how many participants I required to participate in the research and, having decided on semi-structured interviews I took cognisance of the contention of Sarah Baker, Rosalind Edwards and Mark Doige that the answer to the question is 'it depends', and for them it depends on

'epistemological and methodological questions about the nature and purpose of the research: whether the focus of the objectives and of analysis is on commonality or difference or uniqueness or complexity or comparison or instances. Practical issues to take into account include the level of degree, the time available, institutional committee requirements' (Baker, Edwards, and Doidge 2012, 42).

Creswell (2013, 164) recommends 'long interviews with up to ten people'. I carried out 9 semi-structured interviews with people who have been members of a path of renewal group. This included six interviews with individuals, two with two people together and one with a group of eight. Participants who were not ministers were suggested to me by their own minister and two of those ministers also participated in the research. I contacted each of the ministers involved in the process and identified the nature of my study topic and requirement for participants. I asked if they would inform their own Path of Renewal group and ask for volunteers who would be willing to participate. Having received details of volunteers I then decided on factors such as church size and location to try and obtain a spread of responses. The following individuals agreed to

participate¹¹ and the names of individuals and congregations have been changed to ensure anonymity:

Adam from St Andrew's Parish Church: a remote rural congregation with a membership of 20.

Brian and Alison from St Barnabas Parish Church: a city suburbs congregation with a membership of 628.

Becky and Charlie from St Columba's Parish Church: a large town congregation with a membership of 263.

Duncan and Christine from St David's Parish Church: a congregation in a highland village with a membership of 575.

Debbie, Eric and Ethel from St Ethelred's Parish Church: a congregation in a coastal town with a membership of 313.

Fiona from St Fergus' Parish Church: a city congregation with a membership of 289.

Fraser from St George's Parish Church: a city congregation with a membership of 228.

Gordon from St Harold's Parish Church: a town congregation with a membership of 289.

Harold from St Ignatius' Parish Church: a congregation in a rural town with a membership of 176.

Grace from St John's Parish Church: a congregation in a rural town with a membership of 370.

Kenneth from St Leopold's Parish Church: a city suburbs congregation with a membership of 263.

Liam from St Michael's Parish Church: a city centre congregation with a membership of 570.

Sam, a member of the Panel of Review and Reform, a contributor to the leadership of the process.

No research was carried out until an informed consent form had been completed. All interviews followed the same pattern: Introductions; informal conversation including explanation of the purpose of the research, ensuring the participant was comfortable and an explanation of the recording process. A 'Use of Data' form was given to the participant to read and sign prior to the commencement of the interview.¹²

¹¹ Membership figures were taken from annual returns for each congregation. Membership figures are not reliable in determining the health of a congregation or of the size of the regular worshipping community which is usually significantly less.

¹² The interview was then commenced with the following explanatory paragraph:

My name is David Clarkson and I am conducting an interview with (participant name)

Can I ask you to confirm that I have explained the Use of Data form; that you understand and agree that all names and other material which may identify you will be anonymised and be kept confidential at all times; this interview will be digitally recorded, stored in secure storage and

Because I am known to some of the participants as a friend, I was especially careful of not encouraging that relationship itself to be, or appear, coercive. That relationship raises issues for both parties e.g. is it possible for any of those people with whom I have a relationship to provide the personal and unbiased account of their experience the research requires? Did that relationship prevent me from asking deep questions? In practice, the semi-structured nature of the interviews ensured that each participant was asked the same basic set of questions. I used two slightly different sets of questions, one for the ministers and one for the elders. Where both minister and elder from a congregation were involved the slightly different questions became significant. While both could tell me about frequency of meetings etc only the minister could address how the group was formed, conference content etc.

In this chapter I have explained why I believe the research was necessary and that it has relevance in a wider sphere than the Church of Scotland. I discussed my motivations for conducting the research and the methodological choices I made. I acknowledged a vested interest in fostering discipleship and discussed issues of transparency, confidentiality and the daily practice of ethical work. In the next chapter I will explain the origins of the Path of Renewal Process, how it was designed and established, how it was expected to work and how it worked in practice and, lastly, I offer some personal reflection of my involvement in the process.

may be used in future academic research and publications; and, that this interview is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

Are you willing to proceed?

All participants expressed their willingness to proceed, and the interview continued.

3 Chapter 3: What is the Path of Renewal process?

In this chapter I will discuss the origins of the Path of Renewal process and how it was set up, recognising that there were questions around the aims and objectives of the process from its inception. I will discuss how the process was intended to work and whether it actually worked as intended once it was underway. Finally, I will offer some personal reflections of my involvement in the Path of Renewal process and how I related to it prior to this research.

3.1 The origins of the process

The General Assembly of 2001 received a report entitled, A Church Without Walls, from the Special Commission anent Review and Reform. This Special Commission had been set up by the General Assembly in 1999 and given the remit

to re-examine in depth the primary purposes of the church and the shape of the Church of Scotland as we enter into the next Millennium; to formulate proposals for a process of continuing reform; to consult on such matters with other Scottish Churches; and to report to the General Assembly of 2001 (Church of Scotland 2012)

The report is wide ranging in scope covering areas such as the core calling of the Church; constitutional issues for the Church; societal change impacting the Church; Church systems and structures; and, promoting a shift from membership to discipleship. It is a report that is frequently referred to within Church circles as having set out options and possibilities for growth and has resulted in a variety of academic work¹³, and subsequent reports¹⁴, attempting to renew the

¹³ The report is referred to in works by Doug Gay (Gay 2017) and Liam Fraser (Fraser 2021) among others

¹⁴ The report was referenced in reports sent by different Councils or Committees to General Assemblies: The Report of the Panel on Review and Reform, 2013; The Report of the Mission and Discipleship Council, 2013; The Report of the Panel on Review and Reform, 2014; The Report of the Mission and Discipleship Council, 2014; The Report of the World Mission Council 2014; The Report of the Council of Assembly 2015; The Report of the Panel on Review and Reform, 2015; The Report of the General Trustees, 2015; The Report of the Council of Assembly, 2016; The Report of the Panel on Review and Reform, 2016; The Report of the Panel on Review and Reform, 2017; The Report of the Mission and Discipleship Council, 2017; The Report of the Panel on Review and Reform, 2018; The Report of the Council of Assembly, 2019; The Report of the Panel on Review and Reform, 2019; The Report of the Joint Emerging Church Group, 2019; The Report of the Mission and Discipleship Council, 2019; The Report of

denomination through change at every level and in every area of the denomination. Writing in 2023, it is not clear that there has been a significant shift from membership to discipleship.

The report was presented to the General Assembly in 2001 with a verbal summary presented by the Convenor of the panel prior to discussion of the attached deliverances (statements) by Commissioners. Commissioners to the General Assembly discuss reports and then vote to approve, amend or reject the deliverances submitted by the relevant Committee. The Church Without Walls report was presented with four deliverances each of which had various subsections. The first and last were straightforward: receive the report and thank and discharge the Special Commission anent Review and Reform.

The main part of the report was divided into three sections

The Primary Purposes of the Church

The Shape of the Church

Proposals for Continuing Reform (Neilson 2001)

The report starts by affirming the Core Calling of the Church as “Follow Me”, however, recognising that these two words ‘carry within them the complex and comprehensive processes of being God’s people in God’s world’ (Neilson 2001), it goes on to provide and expand a number of descriptors of this calling: personal, local, relational, sacrificial, radical, global, eschatological and doxological.

The report then places this calling into three statements:

1. The Church is called to follow Jesus Christ as Lord.
2. The Church is called to share in Christ’s mission in the world.
3. The Church is called to turn back to God and our neighbour. (Neilson 2001, 3)

the Faith Nurture Forum, 2020; Report of the Special Commission on the Effectiveness of the Presbyterian Form of Church Government, 2021; The Report of the Assembly Trustees, 2022.

All of these reports can be accessed on the Church of Scotland Website:
<https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/general-assembly/publications>

Each of these sections is peppered with references to being, becoming or making disciples. The clear argument is that the call of Christ to follow him involves discipleship, however, the report suggests that a definition of discipleship is not straightforward and requires paragraphs of explanation arguing that “being Christian in today’s Scotland is different from being Christian in 1921” (Neilson 2001, 10)¹⁵.

The report identifies assumptions about the teaching, practices and procedures of the Church of Scotland that have been inherited from the past and explores societal and cultural changes that challenge those assumptions.

The General Assembly has the authority to make structural changes to the denomination and it is clear that in the years since the Church Without Walls report many changes have been made e.g. there are now two main Forums rather than four main Councils. These changes are as a result of both recommendations contained in the Church Without Walls report and of other reports to successive General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland. One key focus for the work of the Special Commission and then the later Panel on Review and Reform was to help stimulate the mission of local congregations around Scotland - partly through study of the Church Without Walls report. The report references some traditional church growth strategies, such as Peter Wagner’s threefold church structure of cell, congregation and celebration¹⁶ as well as suggesting a variety of audit tools to assess effective worship and outreach (Neilson 2001, 22-25). Many Kirk Sessions, including the one I was a member of at the time, read the report and gathered resources that were produced to help congregations implement ideas in the report. Some attempted new things and tried out ideas but although ‘growth’ was a desire indicated by the reports’

¹⁵ Their reference to “1921” refers to The Church of Scotland Act 1921 brought into law ‘The Articles Declaratory of the Church of Scotland. These were intended to define (or declare) the status of the Church to enable a union of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland.

¹⁶ From C Peter Wagner, *The Healthy Church*, Published by Regal Books, Ventura, California. 1996

authors, growth in terms of membership numbers or attendees has not been evident (nor indeed the slowing of decline).

The report's authors were assisted by external consultants, and it was suggested that some members of the Commission should leave parish ministry and work full-time to help establish the ideas in the report across the wider church. That did not happen and, in fact, may have been a contributing factor in the perceived failure of the report to result in the radical change suggested.

In practice, the Panel of Review and Reform was positioned between the Ministries Council and the Mission and Discipleship Council. Both Councils were, in part, tasked to offer strategies and ideas to promote church growth and the Panel was where ideas could be more easily implemented, especially by someone who could champion an idea. The Panel on Review and Reform had a significantly smaller budget than either of the other two and Path of Renewal needed a champion who could promote the idea and secure funding.

Between 2013 and 2015¹⁷ the Rev Graham Duffin¹⁸, along with Rev Peter Neilson¹⁹, offered training on change management for ministers in Scotland, with a focus on the work of Alan Roxburgh and William Bridges. This was not official Church of Scotland training and was not recognised as such. The Ministries Council, Mission and Discipleship Council and the Panel on Review and Reform had held meetings in various parts of Scotland in an attempt to ascertain how they could best support local congregations. Many congregations expressed an interest in church growth and, because of his personal interest in the subject, Rev Duffin was invited to assist the Panel on Review and Reform and subsequently became a member of the Panel. Rev Duffin and Rev Joanne Hood represented the Panel on Review and Reform on a visit to Canada where they visited and discussed 'Learning Communities' and missional church with Alan

¹⁷ All dates and info provided by Rev Duffin.

¹⁸ Rev Duffin is a parish minister at Lonehead and has been involved in national committees of the Church of Scotland. He was a member of the committee that produced the Church Without Walls Report and has a longstanding interest in change management in the church.

¹⁹ Rev Peter Neilson was the Chair of the committee that produced the Church Without Walls Report and, along with Rev Duffin, was a proponent of the need for change in the Church of Scotland.

Roxburgh²⁰. They found a process which was essentially ‘lay led’, focussing on developing members rather than ministers. This was, in part, because of the large geographical areas covered by individual congregations and ministers in some areas of Canada. It would not be possible for a minister to be involved in every activity of the congregation. According to Sam²¹ this team came ‘*back with this notion that what we what we wanted in Scotland was actually a change in mindset, not another programme that we rolled out.*’

Subsequently, two ideas were presented to the Panel for approval: 1. Path of Renewal and 2. An option where a vacant charge could forgo its right to call a minister in return for support in establishing a new lay led ministry. Both were approved by the Panel, but further discussion revealed that the second option was unlikely to have any response because congregations felt that they needed a minister. The Chairs of the Ministries Council, Mission and Discipleship Council, Assembly Trustees and the Panel were able to provide significant funding to Rev Duffin to progress the Path of Renewal process²². By his own account, Rev Duffin was given permission to shape the Path of Renewal process as he saw fit.

One significant decision the Panel made was to ignore the Canadian advice to work with church members. Instead, considering the minister centric focus of the Church of Scotland, smaller more locally based congregations and the need for Presbytery involvement, it was decided that ministers should receive the teaching input and, in turn, teach their own group.

From the beginning there was concern about the time commitment required to design and deliver the process and the lesson on staffing from Church Without Walls was taken on board and the Path of Renewal process was funded and had one full-time member of staff along with volunteer mentors.

²⁰ Rev Duffin recalled an incident where Alan Roxburgh stated quite bluntly that what was being suggested for Scotland would never work because it was too focussed on ministers.

²¹ Sam was a member of the Panel on Review and Reform and a leader in the Path of Renewal Process.

²² According to Sam, the cost of running the pilot process was around £60,000. This was significantly less than the allocated budget.

3.2 The process in theory

In 2015 the Ministries Council of the Church of Scotland, along with the Panel of Review and reform, introduced the Path of Renewal pilot process based on the work of William Bridges. This process was intended to enable participating congregations to change from being attractional to missional in approach (Appendix 1). Bridges makes a distinction between change and transition, in fact, he asserts that, 'it isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions' (Bridges 2009, 3). He suggests that change is situational, and transition is psychological, and that change will not succeed unless the transition is managed well. For Bridges the way to manage this well is to understand that there are three areas to be dealt with in dealing with the transition:

1. 'Ending, losing and letting go.
2. The neutral zone.
3. The new beginning' (Bridges 2009).

Transition starts with an ending - *'the starting point for dealing with transition is not the outcome but the ending that you'll have to make to leave the old situation behind'* (Bridges 2009, 9)

Bridges identifies 7 steps in the life cycle of an organisation:

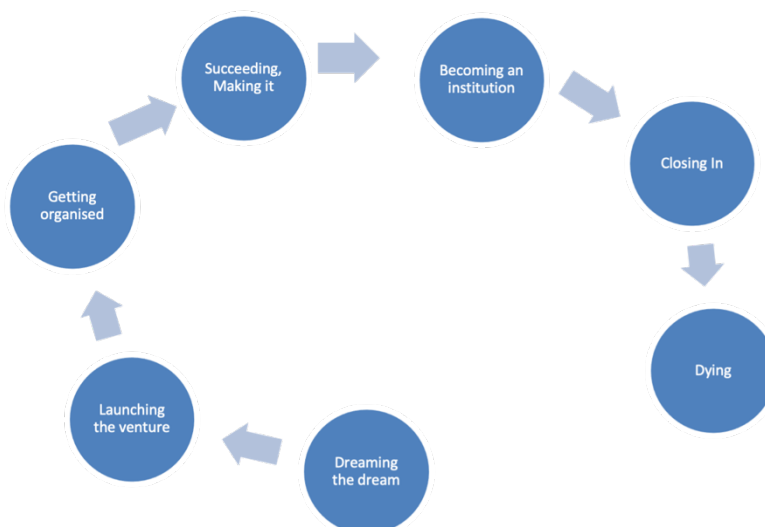


Figure 1 Organisational Change

1. *Dreaming the dream*- the incubation period.
2. *Launching the Venture* - the actual start-up where the main concern is the organisation and flexibility, but it can be a very chaotic period which relies on the dedication of the staff.
3. *Getting Organised* - the chaos cannot continue, and more formal processes are enforced.
4. *Succeeding, Making It* - the organisation is making money and growing.
5. *Becoming an Institution* - the difference between this and Making it is the emphasis moves from doing to being and making an impression is more important than what is actually achieved. Bridges argues that organisations in this stage have a 'sense of having arrived' and that new staff are 'chosen less for their talent and motivation and more for how they will fit in with 'us''. If nothing is done, the natural course of development is that the organisation closes in and loses connection with the world.
6. *Closing In* - the last two sections are of decline. At 'closing in' the organisation focusses on internal dynamics, is unwilling to respond and make significant changes, forgets customers and the ultimate outcome is -
7. *Dying* (Bridges 2009, 78-82)

However, it is during stage five, *Becoming an Institution*, that Bridges identifies the possibility of returning to any of the earlier points and he calls this the 'Path of Renewal'.

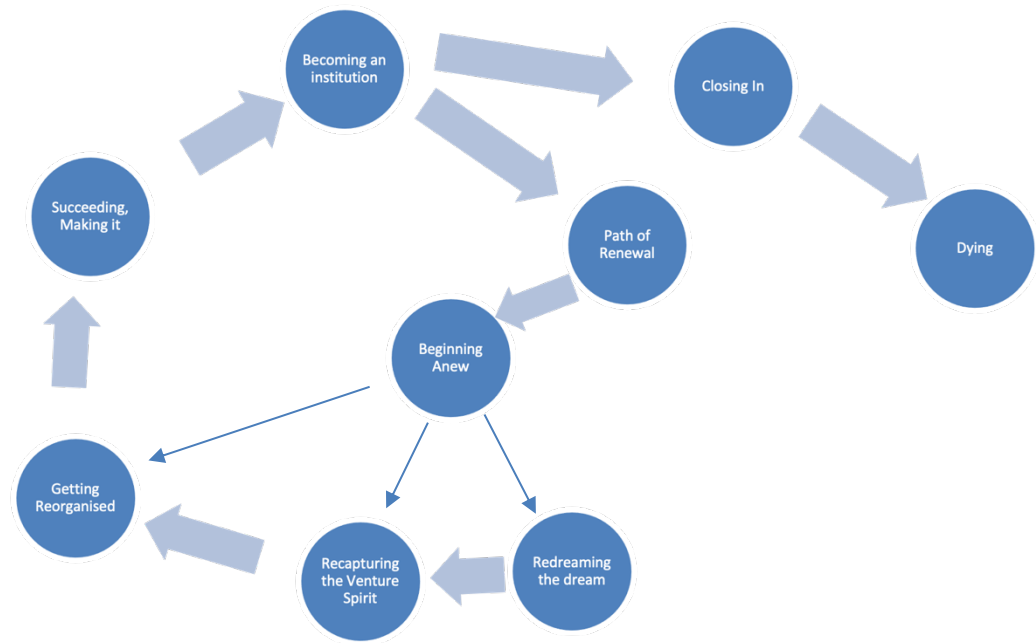


Figure 2 Organisational Change: The Path of Renewal

Bridges proposes that is the point where the alternative of the Path of Renewal, leading to a new step 7 Beginning anew. This, in turn, leads to three of the processes which offer the chance to get back to one of the early stages, here renamed by Bridges as:

4. Redreaming the Dream
5. Recapturing the Venture Spirit
6. Getting Reorganised (Bridges 2009, 88-89)

For the purposes of the 'Path of Renewal' process it was assumed that the Church of Scotland was at stage 6 because of the history of decline.

The process was agreed by the General Assembly in 2015 although no definition was given of what it means to be missional. It was also agreed that support would be given to ministers to allow them time *'to focus on developing and equipping local leaders to reshape the congregation's work according to its locality'* (Pinkerton 2015, 10). Subsequently each participating minister was able to access around one day per week of practical or pastoral support.

Ministers and elders from interested congregations were encouraged to apply for inclusion in the process. The expectation was for a process of change to be

instigated within each participating congregation, and the pilot process was intended to last for three years. Assessment criteria for selection to participate in the Path of Renewal process were included in the original information for congregations:

1. Ministers who recognise the necessity for change, have the gifts to lead through change and a willingness to work with a leadership team.
2. Ministers who are open to engaging in a learning process and reflecting on the changing nature of church life in 21st Century Scotland.
3. Kirk Sessions who are supportive of change and are willing to be involved in championing change within the wider congregation.
4. Congregations who have individuals with the skills and commitment to engage in developing the work and witness of the church in new ways.
5. Ministers and Kirk Sessions who are committed to supporting other churches through the process after they have engaged in it.
6. Presbyteries which are in a position to offer support to ministers and congregations through this process. (Appendix 1)

Considering each in turn:

1. *Ministers who recognise the necessity for change, have the gifts to lead through change and a willingness to work with a leadership team.*

Most Church of Scotland ministers are on their own in a charge and, even now, there are few team ministries. Essentially, the way to evidence appropriate skills and understanding is to have introduced change in the congregation, and for it to have been deemed successful. Only one of the ministers involved had a formal leadership team at the start of the process and, for the rest, these were expected to develop through the process. The Path of Renewal process helped to keep the expectation of change relevant for the congregations involved as well as providing resources to help make changes. It could be argued that the congregations which were chosen did not need to be involved because they were already making changes and trying to engage more missionally with their community. In the event forty-three congregations and one parish grouping applied to participate. Following a discernment process twenty-three congregations were chosen to participate with the rest being offered different levels of participation depending on how closely their experience matched the criteria.

2. *Ministers who are open to engaging in a learning process and reflecting on the changing nature of church life in 21st Century Scotland.*

In seeking to engage ministers who are open to learning and reflecting on the state of the church the process is ‘preaching to the converted’. Of course, there is a need to have ministers who are going to engage in the learning, especially in a pilot process, but that minister needs the support and encouragement of the Kirk Session and wider congregation for any change to be embedded. That was proven by the dropout rate of Pilot Team congregations where the reasons given to Suzanne Ebel²³ were ‘not involving larger groups from the congregation’ earlier (Ebel 2019, 5). Personally, I would be concerned to find a minister who was not continually learning and reflecting on the nature of church life today.

3. *Kirk Sessions who are supportive of change and are willing to be involved in championing change within the wider congregation.*

I have never experienced a Kirk Session that was truly willing to ‘champion change’. In my experience as an elder and minister, the majority of elders on a Kirk Session are quite content to let the minister try new things as long as they don’t have to be involved. Likewise, changes are often acceptable as long as they are deemed not to have gone ‘too far’. My experience is that small changes over time are more acceptable than large changes, however, if the small changes have had a positive effect and trust has been built, it is possible to implement the bigger changes. Tod Bolsinger talks about this in chapter four of his book *Canoeing the Mountains* (Bolsinger 2015), arguing that people will not follow a leader into the unknown (off the map) unless they have already learned to trust that leader (on the map). He argues that most change is not really about change, it is about what in the congregation’s tradition is so precious and essential to be worth keeping, and to accept other losses that allow the essence of these things to remain.

4. *Congregations who have individuals with the skills and commitment to engage in developing the work and witness of the church in new ways.*

²³ Suzanne Ebel was employed by the Panel on Review and Reform to conduct research on the Path of Renewal Process. Research consisted of one-to-one interviews, group interviews and questionnaires. Suzanne attended some of the conferences and prepared reports for the Panel.

Again, the problem in looking for members who have the skills to ‘develop the work and witness of the church in new ways’ is that most are already over-committed. Those that have these skills are usually already involved in the life of the church and often work and/or family life precludes deeper involvement.

5. *Ministers and Kirk Sessions who are committed to supporting other churches through the process after they have engaged in it.*

In my situation, the idea of supporting other congregations was the area over which there was most discussion with the Kirk Session. It raised questions of time commitment, resources, training for me and how that would affect my availability to my own congregation. I believe that this idea was, and is, vital to sustain growth across the church more widely. Difficulties in achieving this arose during the pilot process: participating congregations were spread out across the country making meaningful collaboration difficult; there were not enough staff members to enable regular contact to be maintained with congregations, especially those on the Pilot Team and Pilot light process; where there was contact it was between Path of Renewal groups rather than the wider congregation, therefore the impact on the wider congregation was minimal.

6. *Presbyteries which are in a position to offer support to ministers and congregations through this process.*

In principle every Presbytery should have been able to offer support to ministers and congregations through the process, however the type and level of support was never identified e.g. some small Presbyteries would not have been able to provide financial support but could have offered pulpit supply²⁴ while others could have offered both. While every congregation that participated at any level of the process had support from their Presbytery to apply, most Presbyteries offered little ongoing support. Every participating congregation was expected to ‘report to Presbytery’ each year with an update of the process and most received a written or verbal report. Some,

²⁴ Pulpit supply would allow a participating minister to take the Sunday after training input off, allowing for time to reflect on the learning, by having someone else lead worship. Some ministers chose not to use this option and others had nobody who could cover for them.

including the Presbytery I was in at the time, passed the written report to the appropriate committee but Presbytery was never updated, and never asked for an update.

It is clear from these assessment criteria that the emphasis was squarely on ministers with some input from Presbytery and Kirk Sessions. It was a 'top down' process, training ministers and expecting them to teach others. My experience of a similar system was as a First Aid instructor. I was trained and then taught others in a class. This worked well when there was a clear curriculum with specific core subjects to cover however, my experience on Path of Renewal was different. Because of the lack of clear direction, and teaching input often by presentation and group discussion, it was sometimes difficult to share the learning with my group. Although I had access to the presentations used for the training shared with ministers, I could not fully share the discussion and experience of those other ministers.

The 'top down' style is focussed on 'leaders. In a congregation the minister is usually understood to be the leader, followed by the Session Clerk and elders, therefore, the idea of building a separate 'leadership team' can be problematic in a Presbyterian context. In practice many Church of Scotland elders would not view themselves as 'leaders', considering their role to be more pastoral. None of my original Path of Renewal group, even those who were elders, would have considered themselves leaders in the congregation although most were displaying active leadership.

The process was based on work by William Bridges (Bridges 2009). What remains unclear is why this idea by Bridges was chosen over other work by other practitioners, except that Rev Duffin was already familiar with the work of Bridges.

Bridges is not a church consultant or an expert in missiology, instead he is a business consultant with a focus on change management. He suggests that change is situational and transition is psychological, asserting that 'it isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions' (Bridges 2009, 3). For Bridges, change will not succeed unless the transition is managed well, and that requires an understanding that there are three areas of transition to be dealt with:

1. 'Ending, losing and letting go.
2. The neutral zone.
3. The new beginning' (Bridges 2009, 43-58).

Bridges further identifies seven steps in the life cycle of an organisation, the last two of which relate to decline. He argues that the time eventually arrives when the organisation is so settled that its primary focus is on internal dynamics, and it is unwilling to respond or make significant changes in light of external circumstances. The next step is the death of the organisation. However, it is at the point between these two that Bridges identifies the possibility of returning to any of the earlier steps, and he calls this the Path of Renewal (Bridges 2009, 47-49).

This analogy seemed to fit the Church of Scotland context well as it appeared that the Church could be identified as having an internal focus and a history of numerical decline. The church of Scotland Yearbook for 2022-23 gives statistics for the number of communicant members for comparison: 1981 - 938,930; 2001 - 590,824; 2021 - 283,600. That is a reduction of 655,330 in forty years. It should be recognised that these figures are likely to be skewed in two directions: 1. The figure is taken from a roll held by every congregation and therefore relies on the accuracy of these rolls. My experience is that there are often people who have been kept on the roll despite the fact they never attend 2. It does not take account of the many people who do attend but have never formally become members of a congregation.

The Panel of Review and Reform expected each participating congregation to work through a process of change which would lead them to become more missional. Participating ministers attended two or three-day conferences which included teaching, group work and reflection. During the first few conferences, the training given to participating ministers focussed on the differences between attractional and missional paradigms of church, drawing heavily on writing by Roxburgh (Introducing the Missional Church: What it is, Why it matters, How to become one) and Hirsch (The Forgotten Ways) among others. In that context attractional was understood as a congregation organising events and activities which are specifically designed to draw people in and, once they have come in, to keep them involved and incorporate them into existing structures. Examples

of this kind of thinking include revamping worship music or holding events in the expectation that people will be interested enough to attend. In these terms my congregation would have been considered attractational. Most of our activities focussed on getting people to the Sunday morning service or other activities we ‘provided’.

On the other hand, Roxburgh argues that church leaders are so embedded in church thinking that the wrong questions are being asked:

‘How do we do church better on Sunday so that it is more relevant to where these people are? How do we get these people in the coffee shop to church on Sunday? Then I realised my questions were all wrong. They were my default questions, church questions. I hardly ever stopped long enough to listen to the people, because when they voiced their concerns, I was busy trying to come up with strategies to get them to come to my church. Too often church questions reveal the “seeker church” mentality and result in a search for successful techniques to draw people to the church as if the church is the answer to every question’ (Roxburgh 2011, 25).

In learning to be missional, the Path of Renewal process leaders encouraged participants to read other books by Roxburgh²⁵ and others²⁶ with a view of helping deepen the understanding that missional and missionary are closely linked. Becoming missional involved a changing mindset from ‘come to church’ to ‘go as church’²⁷.

The Ministries Council and the Panel of Review and Reform issued a document to every congregation explaining the Path of Renewal process and information on how to apply to participate. This document gave the desired outcomes of the process as:

1. ‘Ministers equipped to lead through transition and in missional churches.
2. Congregations with a missional focus and a team approach to ministry.
3. The development of new local leadership.

²⁵ Examples are : *Introducing the Missional Church: What it is, Why it matters, How to become one* (2009); *The Missional Leader: equipping your church to reach a changing world* (2011); and, *Structured for Mission: renewing the culture of the church* (2015).

²⁶ Examples are: Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: your church can become a missionary in your community*; Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith*.

²⁷ The link to Roxburgh is, again, work previously done, and connections made, by Rev Duffin.

4. The development of a proven approach to transitioning churches from which others will benefit.
5. Although not the primary focus, it is hoped that some of those who become involved as leaders at a local level will subsequently sense a call to Ministry of Word and Sacrament within the national church.²⁸

Ebel further observed that the focus on missional churches should result in congregations which displayed three

‘key characteristics:

- Vibrant, attractive worshipping communities
- Who are forming people in faith and,
- Connected with their wider communities.

In terms of outcome these are designed to lead to:

- A growth in numbers
- A deepening commitment to Christ and,
- A growing impact on the community.’ (Ebel 2019)

Although these key characteristics and outcomes appeared in Ebel’s 2019 report, they did not appear in the original information sent to congregations. Once the process had begun a further set of ‘Goals and Objectives’ was proposed (Duffin 2016):

- Ensuring those in key leadership roles to play the role of enablers and equippers.
- Rooting members in their walk with Christ, deepening faith and commitment.
- Building leaders - discerning those with leadership gifts and helping them to develop both character and expertise for leadership.
- Creating Christian community where all relationships are governed by Kingdom values and where relevant, inspiring worship has a central place.
- Equipping members to live for Christ in their families, workplace, communities and the world and to be agents of change, seeking to bring Kingdom values.
- To be active partners with other in community initiatives which are helping to bring positive transformation to lives and communities - recognising God at Work in and through these.
- Equipping members to give a “reason for the hope that is in them” and encouraging members to speak appropriately about their faith.
- Creating opportunities for those interested in exploring faith to do so.

²⁸ Appendix 1 Section 2

Although a researcher was engaged to review the process, and a report was subsequently presented to the General Assembly in 2019, these success criteria were not regularly discussed with participants during the process. It is not clear to what extent, if at all, Church Colleges or Academic Theologians were involved in the planning or preparing of the goals and objectives, or how to effectively develop a plan to evaluate and monitor success against these. When asked about this Sam stated:

‘That, that came down to who was available to do research. With one of the factors, you know, we identified someone that would do the research for us. And she was, she was pretty experienced in measuring qualitative rather than quantitative things. We also knew that the nature of this, what we’re looking for was growth. But not necessarily growth in numbers. So, we needed a way of looking at growth and impact, growth and spiritual life, that kind of stuff. And we had to, we had to be a bit subtle about that in the early stages, because basically, the church was funding this and wanted to see growth in membership. So there was a bit of, you know, negotiation and not under-handedness, but in subtlety about what we would measure.’

Sam identified the issue that the central committees of the church were looking for growth in membership when the overall trend for years before had been decline. It appeared that some people were looking for a ‘quick fix’.

3.3 The Process in practice

My congregation successfully applied for a place on the process and, along with another twenty-two congregations, we participated in the pilot process from January 2016 to December 2018. Because of the interest shown by congregations a further nine were offered a reduced package of training for ministers (known as Pilot Light), with a further six being offered training for a congregational group rather than the minister (known as Pilot Team) (Ebel 2019, 4). My focus is on those involved in the main pilot process.

The Pilot programme had ‘six interlinked and overlapping steps:

- Formation of a local leadership team of five to eight members from different backgrounds and different generations.
- The development of this group as individuals and as a team, with deepening faith, commitment and confidence.

- The development of appropriate missional initiatives by the team. This might be as simple as members of the team creating better relationships with their neighbours, work colleagues, or those they socialise with.
- Creating effective opportunities for those who do not currently attend church activities or worship to explore and be nurtured in faith and to experience Christian community.
- Providing opportunities for new people to be involved in missional initiatives.
- Adapting of the 'mainstream' church programme to take account of what is being learnt and to allow a 'coming together' of those involved in the new initiatives with those involved in current activities and worship. (Ebel 2019, 5)

All participants agree that the first two were achieved, although two groups were larger than eight. The third step is very simplistic if all that is needed is a better relationship with someone. Some of the goals and objectives 'played up' the potential for growth to ensure funding whereas this seems to minimise the requirement for participation. Only one participant involved non-members who then started attending church services and activities. Most participants nurtured church members in their faith as part of the group and that might subsequently provide a springboard for others to join in. By the end of the three-year process all participants had encouraged people in their congregation to get involved in some sort of missional activity. Adapting the mainstream programme was achieved to varying degrees and most involved group members in services. For some, this was the extent of the change and there was no lasting change to style or programme. Others reported a change in style of services but not to the programme. This could, in part, be because congregations that were involved were not programme driven.

Not all of the participating congregations completed the full three years of the process as six ministers have moved to a different charge, two have left the Church of Scotland and one retired (Ebel 2019, 8). Two of these congregations have maintained their Path of Renewal group despite having no minister.

Each of the participating ministers had a variety of teaching and support during the process. There were regular residential days where the main block of teaching was done, alongside 'Learning Communities' (a group of 4-6 ministers plus a mentor) and individual meetings with a mentor. Most teaching was carried out by 'in house' mentors with additional input from other experienced trainers. Initially, the training focussed on church leadership and change management

using Bridges' work on transition (Bridges 2009, 43-52). This emphasised the need for shared responsibility in trying to transform the whole culture of the congregation to be less focussed on the minister. As a result, each participating minister was asked to set aside time to invest in a few people who could take on leadership roles in the congregation. Many congregations have people who would be looked on as leaders because of their role, but they may not actually lead in practice, e.g. Elders, Sunday School Teachers, Boys Brigade Officers. Not only that, but many would not be equipped to lead a process of change even if they wanted to. For me, this is where the issue of discipleship arises. It is not simply a question of how to develop leaders but who should be leaders? What characteristics should we look for in leaders and should those leaders also be invited to participate as group members? For me, I looked for people I would identify as disciples - in my view, people who were actively trying to be Christian in character and behaviour, were willing to engage in bible study and prayer, were 'seeking God' and were willing to try new ways of 'being and doing' church, and who also demonstrated the capacity to lead the change process, even if they did not hold a²⁹ 'position' within the church.

Further input was given on missional theology³⁰ with an additional focus on PCUSA minister and Fuller academic Todd Bolsinger's book, 'Canoeing the Mountains' (Bolsinger 2015)³¹, to the extent that he was invited to the April 2017 residential for the Pilot process and also participated in the Pilot Light and Team day conference. His focus was to help ministers appreciate the challenges to their practices and thinking which striving for cultural change in a congregation brings.

²⁹ Coming to Path of Renewal I had a clear understanding of what I thought discipleship is. It took me some time to realise that my understanding was not shared by all of the members of my group. In fact, there were different assumptions being made because group members approached discipleship differently. These differences were not obvious to me even though we talked about discipleship often. It was only when two of my group stated that they would not call themselves disciples that I began to understand that we had not been specific enough in trying to define and understand what discipleship is. This helped me realise the importance of defining the term and not assuming that everyone approaches it in the same way.

³⁰ A suggested reading list included (Bosch 1999, Guder and Barrett 1998, Chester and Timmis 2008, Hastings 2012, Rooms 2014)

³¹ Bolsinger's work straddles missiology, ecclesiology and leadership/organisational studies – the decision to invite a presbyterian figure was strategic because he had an understanding of Presbyterian styles and forms of worship.

Having to identify potential leaders to participate in the process presented difficulties for many of the ministers involved. Some with very small congregations or multiple smaller charges had a limited pool from which to choose. Others found that in a linked charge one congregation was more willing to change than the other, causing a potential imbalance in the number of leaders from each. Having 'unsuitable' volunteers was also a problem for some. My own issue was that I had previously utilised the teaching from Mike Breen around huddles (Breen 2011, 21-24) and had chosen seven members to participate in forming a huddle with me. While there was a clear long-term benefit for me and the others, this group became known in the congregation as 'the minister's favourites', resulting in suspicion and negativity towards them. I was determined to try, as far as possible, to avoid that happening with the Path of Renewal group, therefore I held an open meeting for anyone, including those who were not members of but had some connection with the congregation, to attend. I explained as much as I knew about the process and set out my expectation that participation in our group would require meeting together each fortnight for one and a half to two hours, as well as reading and preparing in between. Eighteen people attended that meeting, and eleven of them agreed to participate. One subsequently left the area due to work commitments and Rev. Liz Crumlish, the Path of Renewal Co-ordinator joined our group (with the consent of group members) on becoming a member of our congregation.

I have tried to develop a team approach to ministry throughout my time in ministry, encouraging members to participate in all aspects of church life including leading worship and pastoral visitation. I have worked hard to encourage the attitude that it is better to try and fail than not to try at all, although there was a vocal minority within the congregation who did not share that view. My Kirk Session (the elders) were very supportive of initiatives that we had introduced, and changes we had made, as long as it did not mean that they as individuals have had to change.

My group met every fortnight, and this included time to chat and share experiences; a Bible reading with an opportunity to share anything from the reading that has struck us in some way (dwelling in the Word); time for prayer; time for book group activities and discussion of shared reading; or time to

discuss issues that were of particular relevance to the congregation. Over the three years we met, this group bonded very well and close relationships were developed. There was often a sharing of deeply personal information from someone within the group, to a degree that I had not experienced before in a group of that size. There was obvious support and encouragement during the group meetings and that now extends to other occasions where members of the group meet together. Walton (2011, 103) notes this to be true of other small groups:

‘The value of small groups according to this is in deepening knowledge of God, building meaningful relationships, and accountability for Christian living and outreach, though interestingly these values are set within larger church values and commitments including commitment to justice and the eradication of poverty.’

My group had a particular focus on the book by Michael Frost, *Surprise the world: the five habits of highly missional people* (Frost 2015). Frost suggests that ‘we (Christians) need to become a godly, intriguing, socially adventurous, joyous presence in the lives of others’ (2015, 14) if we are to be effective disciples. He then offers five habits which are designed to strengthen the links between our inner spirituality and outward action. He argues that our personal habits shape our values and that ‘we need to be fostering a set of habits among Christians that will in turn shape their values and beliefs.’ (2015, 19) The five habits to develop are:

- Bless - I will bless three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.
- Eat - I will eat with three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.
- Listen - I will spend at least one period of the week listening for the Spirit’s voice.
- Learn - I will spend at least one period of the week learning Christ.
- Sent - I will journal throughout the week about all the ways I alerted others to the universal reign of God through Christ (Frost 2015, 29-99)

We spent one evening talking about each of the habits, wondering if we agreed with the rationale or not, asking if we could actually see ourselves trying to put it into practice. Every member of the group agreed to try to implement the habits and we spent time at each subsequent meeting talking about how we

were managing individually and encouraging each other to keep going. This seemed to be a fairly straightforward way of combining the learning and practice necessary for discipleship.

My local group spent a significant amount of time together discussing what a disciple is and I will give a brief summary here with a fuller exploration of discipleship in the next chapter. The problem for the church today is that if we are to make disciples, we need to have a clear idea of what it is we are trying to reproduce. What does a disciple look like today? There is a wealth of literature on making disciples (Bonhoeffer, Kelly, and Godsey 2000, Pattarumadathil 2008, Breen 2011, Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen 2014)³², much of which fails to define what a disciple actually is. The call of Christ to the first disciples was a combination of, ‘Follow me’ or, ‘Come and see’ (Mt 9:9; Mk 1:17-20; Jn 1:39). Only in Luke is the call to Simon, James and John preceded by a miracle and, although a reading of the gospels suggests that the disciples may have had some knowledge of Jesus prior to being called, the call itself is very vague. There is no specified timescale, no job description, nothing on which to base a decision of whether to follow or not. It was only after they had decided to follow that they began to learn what was expected. Some of his followers stopped following him because they found it too difficult (Jn 6:66).

Part of the problem of defining what a disciple is, arises because, rather than trying to define something that is static with specific properties, what is required is a definition of a relationship. A disciple may best be defined by his or her relationship with God. It is possible that what may be considered to be a requirement of a disciple in one area of the world might be quite different in other areas. Rowan Williams (2016, x) expresses it as discovering

‘what’s involved in our Christian commitment not (of course) by reading books about it but by the daily effort to live in a way that allows Jesus Christ to come through in our lives; we are caught up in the task of showing that what we say is credible.’

Williams (Williams 2016, 1) goes on to suggest that ‘discipleship is about how we live; not just the decisions we make, not just the things we believe, but a

³² These are a few illustrative examples.

state of being.’ He is clear that being a disciple is more than simply attending church services or studying the bible, but includes awareness and expectancy (Williams 2016, 8) of the love of God so that,

‘We in our discipleship are summoned to gaze into the mystery of that infinite love and to seek to do that same eternal will: to “act” that same action, on earth as it is in heaven, as the Lord’s Prayer puts it.’ (Williams 2016, 14)

So, being a disciple means following the teaching and example of Jesus, or as Williams (Williams 2016, 15) says,

‘what it means practically for the Christian today is seeking constantly the company of other servants of Christ, the company of the revelation of Christ in Scripture, the company of the Father and the Son, in the Spirit, in prayer.’

This is clearly tied in with ‘being disciples’, the title of the book, but misses out some of the practical application concerned with discipleship. If Jesus’ disciples were learning to follow it was learning which was ‘practical and not merely theoretical’ (Dunn 1992, 124).

Manson argues:

‘Jesus was their Master not so much as a teacher of right doctrine, but rather as the master-craftsman whom they were to follow and imitate. Discipleship was not matriculation in a Rabbinical College but apprenticeship to the work of the Kingdom... [They were] ‘apprentices’ rather than ‘students’. (Manson 1963, 239-240)

We used Manson’s idea as the model in my Path of Renewal group - we were the apprentices, learning from Jesus and trying to imitate him.

In his book, ‘Imagine how we can reach the UK’, Mark Greene defines what a disciple is in multiple ways, rather than one overall definition:

A disciple is an active, intentional learner.

A disciple is an apprentice and a practitioner - not just a student of the Word but a doer of it.

A disciple is a follower of a particular teacher.

A disciple is accountable to someone who knows them and helps them to learn and grow and live.

A disciple is outwardly orientated, focused on helping others learn what it means to be a disciple. (Greene 2004)

This allows Greene to take a wider view of discipleship, something I believe is important and will return to in a later chapter.

The review above reflects my own learning and reading over the past seven years. Reflecting on the Path of Renewal process, and this research, I realise that I had grown up with a fairly clear but quite narrow definition of discipleship. We often talked about being disciples in my Brethren congregation³³ and there was great emphasis on being ‘born again’, specifically being able to articulate a moment when the need for forgiveness was identified and you ‘gave your life to Jesus’. Brethren congregations in Scotland sent missionaries all over the world in response to that personal commitment, many of whom were supported financially by the regular giving of different congregations. For those ‘at home’ the expectation was less of total sacrifice than of attending services and having regular quiet times. Other than Sunday School or holiday clubs I do not recall significant engagement with the local community.

I know that there is value in meeting together for worship and study, for personal time with God and for supporting missionary work in other places, however, I also believe that alone is not enough. As previously stated, I believe churches need to engage with their local community to demonstrate the love of God. If being a Christian does not make a difference in my life, why would anyone want to know what I believe?

For now, I want to offer some personal reflections on my involvement in the process, particularly relating to my own learning on discipleship.

³³ This was the Open Brethren tradition of the Plymouth Brethren movement - for background information see Neil Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland 1838-2000. A Social Study of an Evangelical Movement* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2002)

3.4 Personal reflections on the process

The first few months for me were challenging and it was often an uncomfortable place to be, even though some of the uncertainty was expected. I am a Church of Scotland Minister and, at the time, was in a small congregation in a town on the Clyde coast, my first charge³⁴. The congregation had a history of engagement with a partner congregation in Malawi but, until my induction to the charge, there was not so much focus on the local community. In common with many congregations, there had been a steady decline in numbers attending our Sunday morning service, and overall membership had also declined.

I was aware from friends and colleagues that there was a trend towards moving from a first charge around five years after being inducted. When I started, I felt that five years was too soon to consider leaving a charge, however, I found that as the five-year anniversary approached I became restless. I felt that I had done everything I could, or knew how to, and unless there was a change or something new it might be time to move on. Around this time was when I first heard of the Path of Renewal process, and I was drawn to it, partly by this restlessness but mainly because it seemed to offer tools and resources for managing change. I believed that the congregation needed to change, needed to try new things, and tackle the issue of becoming disciples in a more focussed way.

Path of Renewal seemed to offer what I was looking for and I was able to persuade my Kirk Session that it would be a positive step for us to be involved. I remember being really anxious about having two members of the committee visiting the congregation so that they could decide whether or not we should be accepted on the process. The meeting was a huge success and I sat with tears in my eyes as I watched this disparate group of people, who often argued over the smallest thing, share together with real passion and enthusiasm. It was a humbling experience. I was worried because there was a real mix within the Session. There were elders who had been in the congregation for decades and others who had only been members for a few years, and elders even less time. There was a real sense of being in it together though.

³⁴ This is the term used in the Church of Scotland for a congregation to which a minister is called.

There was some excitement when we were selected as one of the pilot congregations but almost immediately people started asking what we were going to do and what we were aiming to achieve. We were an attractional congregation, expecting people to come because we were there. We had tinkered at the edges of being missional and getting out into the community in different ways, so I was ready for it to be tough, but I was uncertain if I would be able to lead the congregation.

In one sense, I was ready to lead, but I did not know how to do what Path of Renewal was asking. My training, and all my experience, was about doing what has always been done. It's about maintenance. I was reading Ed Stetzer's book, 'What Does Missional Mean?' (2006) He suggests that there is no clear definition of 'missional' but it's about scrapping all we know and do in church and finding ways to 'be' in the community. He argues that I was wasting my time trying to turn around an existing congregation. There is so much to like in what he says but, if he was correct, there was no hope for my congregation. I could see the decline. There were empty seats where people were no longer able to attend or had died. The Sunday School was almost gone as parents struggled with the church or sport question and had decided on sport.

The Path of Renewal process offered training and advice, but I also feel that the best thing it had to offer was hope.

Having been accepted onto the process we waited to hear what was going to happen. At each step we have had clear and explicit instructions. The way forward was made obvious. However, that is only true of the 'what, and 'why' of the process. The 'how' was not at all clear. This was where we started focussing on Bridges book, 'Managing Transitions: Making the most of change' (Bridges 2009). What was not clear to me was whether there was any substance to the whole thing. It could have been a nice new name for a pet project for a small group of people, as very few within the wider church seem to have any knowledge of it. If it was going to have any impact it needed to be better explained and shared with a much wider group.

Bridges focuses on transitions and argues that transition starts with an ending: - "the starting point for dealing with transition is not the outcome but the ending

that you'll have to make to leave the old situation behind" (Bridges 2009, 9). I understand that in order to move on people have to let go of their old ways and their old identity, but I also know from personal experience that doing so is painful and difficult. It is much easier if there is a clear goal in sight and most of the examples Bridges uses have that. We did not. I could not go to my congregation and say, "This is what we are aiming for", or, "This will be the outcome." I could explain a church refurbishment programme, but I struggled to explain the Path of Renewal process. It was too vague. As part of the process, I was expected to devote one day per week to it. Initially, I was uncertain as to what to do on that day. If I did not understand, how could I explain it to anybody else.

Bridges idea of a neutral zone was one which I found particularly difficult. He describes it as an in between time, a time when the old has gone but the new is not fully in place. He writes:

"The neutral zone is like the wilderness through which Moses led his people. That took 40 years, you remember - not because they were lost but because the generation that had known Egypt had to die off before the Israelites could enter the Promised Land. Taken literally, that's a pretty discouraging idea: that things won't really change until a whole generation of workers dies. But on a less literal level, message of Moses long journey through the wilderness is both less daunting and more applicable to your situation: the outlook, attitudes, values, Self-images, and ways of thinking that were functional in the past have to "die" before people can be ready for life in the present. Moses took care of transition's ending phase when he led his people out of Egypt, but it was the 40 years in the neutral zone wilderness that got Egypt out of his people. It won't take you 40 years, but you aren't going to be able to do it in a few weeks either." (Bridges 2009, 43)

As a Minister that was a very uncomfortable place to have to take people. I was supposed to keep the structures and processes of the past going while, at the same time, work at developing a completely new way of being church. What was not clear was if that meant deliberately leaving people in the 'neutral zone'? What I could not understand was how to move from the 'old ways', without actually doing that in practice, because we have to maintain them until any changes work through to the congregation, while heading toward the new thing,

whatever that is. That effectively leaves us in the zone which, according to Bridges, is like the Children of Israel in the wilderness. I was not remotely comfortable with that.

Even the use of that word 'being' in relation to church was something that many people in my congregation did not understand. For many of those people church is something you do, something you go to, or something you are part of. I'm sure most of my congregation understood that church is the people and not the building, but I also knew there was a fairly traditional view of that as it relates to the Sunday service, rather than as individuals 'being church' in the community.

Choosing people to be in our Path of Renewal group was easier than I had expected. I have already written about that process, but it is pertinent to stress the importance of highlighting the expectations required of participants. I will return to this in a later chapter.

The group was mixed in age, experience and faith. Two had been involved in the congregation for many years and the rest were newer members. They did not know each other at the start of the process, and I was not sure what to do to help them develop strong relationships. Six months into the process I wrote this in my journal:

All of the ministers who are involved have been told to go and 'forget about it' for the summer, making sure we have time off. How on earth could anyone expect that to happen? I still have no idea how to explain any of it to my congregation. I have used 'Path of Renewal' as a phrase to introduce some new things to the congregation but there is nothing concrete to show for six months of reading and training courses.

That's not totally true. I have a group of people who have volunteered to be part of the group to take it forward but with no idea of how to do that. Everyone is waiting for me to lead, and I have no idea what to tell them. I am conscious that I have said time and again that reading and praying is vital to faith and growth but I'm struggling to see where God fits into all of this. It's not that I think God can't be in a business model, I'm sure that's not the problem. The problem is how to know when God is speaking when praying and reading are not actually helping. I realise how easy it is to simply tell people to pray, but what if the answer takes time to come, or doesn't come at all?

Ironically, what I have found helpful is the knowledge that other ministers on the process feel the same.

I struggled with the idea that I was somehow the bridge between the group and the congregation but more so with the thought that I might somehow be thought of as the bridge between God and the group. It seemed to me that the whole point of the Path of Renewal process was to enable each person to hear from God and not rely on one set of spiritual ears. If we could not develop the skills to hear from God as individuals we were doomed to fail. Even then I knew that the building, if not the people, would be in that place long after I had gone, but if the people were to continue then they had to learn to hear from God and not rely on 'the minister'.

There is something powerful about the image of a bridge in Christian ministry and walking the path is a well-established metaphor for a faith journey. We talk about journeying with God, following him, walking in his footsteps, the broad and the narrow way. The concept is well enough known for Bridges to talk about Moses leading the people of Israel on their journey in the wilderness to a secular audience (Bridges 2009, 43). The Bible is full of journeys for us to draw lessons from as we look to the future. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Mary and Joseph, Paul and a host of other Bible characters all went on a journey. They started in different places, and they had different reasons for going, but the thing that makes them stand out is that God sent them. Whether it was a burning bush or an angelic visitation, including the whole choir, each of these went on their journey at God's instruction and with the promise of his presence ringing in their ears. In the book of acts, Paul and Barnabas are commissioned by God to go on a journey around the northern Mediterranean preaching about Jesus. There were riots, stonings, healings and other signs and wonders. Churches were planted and people came to believe in Jesus. Sometime later Paul decided that they should do a return visit but when Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them it caused such a severe argument that even Barnabas, the 'Son of Encouragement', the one who had stood up for Paul after his conversion, could not maintain the friendship. The writer of Acts subsequently tells us that both men took different friends on separate journeys, having been commended by the church. (Acts 13-21)

The Path of Renewal process was about learning and growing and I found that it changed me. I learned a lesson while on holiday at Yosemite National Park. My wife and I were walking along a trail when we arrived at a bridge. As we approached there was a sign indicating that drinking water was available at the far side. We headed straight for the water and filled up our bottles. Looking back, I noticed people stopping on the bridge. Some were taking selfies; some were looking at the river underneath and others were enjoying the slight breeze and spray from the river. Others did what we had done and headed straight for the drinking water. When I related what I had seen to the church it seemed clear to me that there were two types of people: firstly, those who crossed straight for the drinking water were people who had a purpose. They knew what they needed to do to survive and where to go for the supplies they needed. Secondly, those who waited on the bridge, content with what they had and wanting to wait where they were, were like the majority of my congregation. My wife, however, saw it differently. What she saw were people who couldn't even wait a few moments to look at the view or take time for the photograph. Some of the people who reached the bridge enjoyed the view and then went back the way they had come, and already had enough water. Others enjoyed the view and then came and filled their water bottles. My wife saw people who were on the same journey as us but were prepared to take it more slowly, resting and enjoying the view on the way.

I learned that my perspective is not always right. Sometimes it's not even a valid perspective as it is affected by my baggage and my view of life. I have a tendency, as my mother would say, to breenge from one thing to the next, never taking time to enjoy the view. I learned that to fully benefit from the Path of Renewal process I needed to learn to stop and make time for myself and for others.

Ian Cron writes about Chase who, in a crisis of faith is taken by an old friend on a pilgrimage following Francis of Assisi. He writes, "Thomas ate quietly, sometimes smiling and nodding. He seemed to enjoy watching old friends walk over long-forgotten bridges together" (Cron 2013, 67). I began to realise why as ministers we were told at the beginning of this process that we needed to give one day a week to it. When everything is busy and there are constant demands

on your time it is so easy to fill your life with 'doing' that there is no time left over for 'being'.

During the process I struggled with knowing how to help members of my congregation, particularly older people, get ready for change³⁵. Someone likened it to tourists who visited the town but have never lived there. That congregation could trace roots back to 1563 and, in some ways, I felt like a tourist. I have seen what the short termers see, but there are people in the congregation who have lived it. One member had been baptised and been a member there for 95 years. There is very little that she had not seen of life in that congregation. Perhaps there are rose tinted glasses when she talks of the past or perhaps it was as good as she remembers. The thing is it is her past, but not mine. I was a tourist. And yet, by reason of my role and my calling I was expected to lead. I was expected somehow to know what to do, where to go and how to take her and her fellow residents to a new place. A place where even the familiar things seem to be new and different.

For me, there were two main blessings of being involved in the process: the other participants and my church group members. There were twenty-four ministers in the group, divided into four, roughly geographical, groups of six. During the conferences there were either two groups of twelve (different each time) or all of us together. This allowed strong relationships to be built and a depth of sharing that I had never experienced in similar groups. Although we were from different theological perspectives, theology was never a divisive issue. We shared experiences of the process and wider church life. We read, prayed, studied and played together. We moaned about the state of the church and encouraged each other to keep going anyway. We supported colleagues as they moved to new congregations, and we learned to listen to God more.

My church group included one person who had not intended to join but was invited in and stayed for the whole three years. Another was very new to faith, and there was a minister, elders, members and me. None of the group knew all of the others at the start and there was a little while when meetings seemed a

³⁵ Not all older people were resistant to change but they were, on the whole, looking for reassurance and guidance in a way that younger people did not seem to need as much.

bit disjointed. I had explained that becoming part of the group meant meeting for around two hours every two weeks with 'homework' in between. The homework consisted mainly of reading the chapter of a book we were to discuss at the next meeting. We met in my house which, other than the church, was the only space large enough to hold everybody. It was not ideal because it was not a neutral space, but the group quickly adapted and it became a safe space. I shared whatever subjects had been covered at conferences with the group, sometimes in depth and sometimes bullet points depending on relevance. We spent time each meeting 'dwelling in the word' and members took it in turn to lead these times. We learned to pray with and for each other, sharing issues and concerns for prayer. Group members were very strict about confidentiality and that meant that trust grew and sharing deepened. I tried, as much as possible, to be another member of the group rather than the leader and the group responded well to that. I am not convinced that would work with a wider group as there is still a different relationship between congregants and 'the minister' because of the role and position of the minister. For me this was liberating because ministers often struggle to find people with whom they can share on a deep level.

We shared food, fun, friendship and fellowship. We laughed together and we cried together. We supported and encouraged each other, and I saw each of those people grow and mature in their faith. Not only that, but other people noticed a difference too. One Sunday morning after a service in which some of the group participated, a member approached me and said, "I see the changes in them. I'm not sure what it is, but I want some!" For me it was discipleship. We were spending time talking to and listening for God together. Then we were trying to live it out. It's not complicated, but it's not easy either.

My surprise was that after eighteen months of meeting together in the group, twelve of which were focussed almost exclusively on talking, reading and thinking about discipleship, it transpired that there was still misunderstanding. I have already written about the assumptions I had made coming into the Path of Renewal process, and I had further assumed that because we had shared learning and experience everyone in the group shared my understanding of discipleship. As far as I was concerned, we were discipling each other. We

shared deeply personal issues and experiences, and we were putting 'book knowledge' into practice. I was growing in faith, and I could see the same in others. Despite having started off with different experiences of God, knowledge of the bible and church we now had this shared time to draw on.

It was at this point, for another paper, that I carried out interviews with eight of my group members. The first question asked about their understanding of discipleship. All of them commented to the effect that they were to do with following someone or something, and for us, it was explicitly about following Jesus. As an aside, I followed up with the question, "Would you call yourself a disciple?" I was utterly amazed when the first person said she would not. Of the eight, one responded positively without hesitation; five paused for a moment, and then each one replied, "Yes, but not a good one", or "Yes, but not very good"; and two immediately responded, "No." I was amazed at these responses because it seemed to me that every one of them was actively engaged in Christian discipleship. At first, I was shattered, thinking all of that time spent together was for nothing, especially as all but one of the others said they probably were, but not very good, disciples. I was challenged to work out where the issue lay. Why were these people who were, as far as I was concerned, disciples unwilling to accept the description? Did they not understand the term? Was it deemed a step too far in terms of commitment? Was it the Scottish attitude that thinks, "I'm not good enough?" In truth it was all of those. Some people thought of disciples in terms of 'the Twelve' in the New Testament, therefore, despite all the work we had done, they felt the term was not applicable to them. Others lacked confidence and thought it was boastful to suggest that they were 'good enough' to be a disciple. This raised profound questions which became central to this thesis.

For me, Path of Renewal was the single most relevant, affirming, challenging and helpful activity I have ever been involved in. I grew in my own faith and understanding through the process. Reading and reflection for this work has helped further shape my understanding and practise of discipleship.

In this chapter I have reflected on the origins of the Path of Renewal process as response to continuing decline in the Church of Scotland. I considered its aims, objectives and implementation and have offered some reflections on my

experience as a participant and the reason I was inclined to research the Path of Renewal process. In the next chapter I will discuss why this research may be of relevance to people today. I will discuss what I believe the bible says a disciple is and place that within academic literature.

4 Chapter 4: An exploration of discipleship

In this chapter having stated that the Path of Renewal process became focussed on discipleship, I will offer some provisional definitions of Christian discipleship. I explain that the issue of discipleship is not only being discussed in the Church of Scotland, but also a hotly debated topic for the Church of England and practitioners and authors in many countries continue to discuss it. As previously stated, whether the frameworks for church renewal are those of 'emerging church', 'church health', 'missional/attractional' or none of these, the theological focus often returns to discipleship.

4.1 Why now: is the research relevant to anyone?

In all of the initial documentation presented to congregations about the Path of Renewal process there was no explicit use of the words disciple or discipleship. There was, therefore, no definition of what a disciple was or what discipleship might involve. However, the idea of following Jesus' call to 'make disciples' (Matthew 28:19) appears, to me, to be implicit in the stated outcomes, especially the suggestion of 'rooting members in their walk with Christ', 'equipping members to live for Christ', 'equipping members to speak appropriately about their faith' and 'creating Christian community governed by Christian values' (Appendix 3). Discipleship was a significant focus of the ongoing training I have received as part of the process. My group read books focusing on discipleship and making disciples (Breen 2011, Roxburgh 2011, Williams 2012, Williams 2016) and we discussed what we learnt from each chapter or section.

According to James Douglas and Norman Hillyer (1982, 287-288) a disciple was understood to be the pupil of a rabbi and, since the pupil often adopted the distinctive teaching of their rabbi, the word came to represent the follower of a particular perspective in religion or philosophy. The followers of John the Baptist were called disciples (Mk 2:18; Jn 1:35). This relationship was stronger than we would experience today and was regarded as something that could not be dissolved (Rengstorff and Kittel 1967, 416-418). The action of those who became companions of Jesus can be described as 'following' (Donahue 1983, 5), but, for me, it involves more than being an attentive student, rather it requires

active participation in Jesus' mission. I agree with N T Wright (1994, 39) that disciples are 'not just head-learners, not just heart-learners, but life-learners.' Richard France (2002, 27-28) suggests that Mark, in his Gospel, does not want his readers to notice the individuals' so much as the group and what they represent', and that Mark's story is 'how twelve ordinary men met Jesus and entered into a new dimension of living' so that his readers have them 'as a guide to their own following of Jesus.'

Darrell Guder locates discipleship within the call of God for a people rather than individuals:

God calls a people into discipleship, formation by Jesus, in order to send it out as an apostolic community, so that each of its members can be an apostolic witness with that flame of the Spirit ignited on every head(Guder 2015, 74).

He is clear about what this people are supposed to do, and whom they represent in the world:

The diverse forms of witness and of the organized church are to be perceived and experienced in the world as testifying to the same Jesus Christ. Their public witness is to carry out the same practices and disciplines of Christian discipleship in a great variety of ways: prayer, worship, praise, proclamation, reconciliation, acts of justice and mercy, endurance under persecution. When people in diverse cultures observe Christian communities in their midst living in these distinctive ways, they encounter the witness that points them to Jesus Christ (Guder 2015, 85).

Guder is also clear in linking discipleship today back to the followers of Jesus:

the Christian community into a relationship of intense personal formation, a process of discipleship paralleling the three years of schooling of those first followers of the Rabbi Jesus. The outcome in every instance is to be a repetition of Jesus' ministry with these disciples: This formation is to flow into apostolic witness, into making the good news known to the world (Guder 2015, 146).

The most well-known disciples of Jesus were the twelve he chose and spent most time with. However, the term is also used of other people, both male and female, who responded to the message of Jesus (Mt 5:1; Lk 19:37). Throughout the Gospels there is the sense that being a disciple involved personal allegiance

to Jesus, expressed in a willingness to follow his teaching. Today, discipleship and the idea of following Christ are regularly used interchangeably as ways of ‘thinking and speaking about the nature of Christian life’ (Longenecker 1996, 1), and Donahue (1983, 5) notes that the actions and behaviour of the disciples is described as ‘following’.

Those who followed Jesus were not just expected to learn from his teaching but were also expected to put his teaching into practice and learn from his example (Mt 10:1; Mk 3:14; Lk 9:1-6). After Pentecost it is clear that these disciples formed the nucleus of the early church, and they were able to share the knowledge and experience gained from spending time with Jesus. The word disciple is not found outwith the Gospels and Acts, with other new Testament writers preferring terms such as believers, saints, or brothers and sisters (Douglas and Hillyer 1982, 288).

In recent years there has been an upsurge in writing about discipleship and it has been a major theme of reports in the Church of England: Towards a Contemporary Theology of Discipleship (Worthen 2014), Getting Discipleship into the Lifeblood: exploring diocesan strategies to mainstream discipleship (Cox 2012), Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-making, An Anglican Guide for Christian Life and Formation (Kafwanka 2016) and Setting God’s People Free (Frost 2017).

These last ten years have seen an increase in discussion about the meaning and relevance of discipleship in the Church of England. I recognise that it is not straightforward to make a comparison between the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. The Church of England is Anglican and has a hierarchical structure with the offices of Deacons, Priests and Bishops, whereas the Church of Scotland is Presbyterian and has, in principle, a flat structure with the office of Minister. Although in a different form, both are established Churches and both serve their communities through a parish structure. Both Churches joined together in issuing the Columba Declaration (Church of Scotland 2016) which recognises “*that we share a common calling within our particular contexts, and that this has enabled us to realise a growth in communion and a partnership in mission*”. The Church of England has quite distinct theological strands, from Anglo-Catholic to Charismatic Evangelical. These are also present, if perhaps not

so apparent, within the Church of Scotland. Within Charismatic Evangelical streams in particular there is significant overlap and mutual influence between these denominations including shared use of the Alpha course, social media and other networks, engaging with (Breen's) huddles, and conferences like the Keswick Convention or Spring Harvest. My experience of this is that within the Evangelical/Charismatic streams there is an affirmation of discipleship and a desire to promote it. There has been significant, sometimes heated, debate for and against a focus on discipleship within the Church of England and as examples of that debate I quote Prof Linda Woodhead and Rev Angela Tilby who have written opinion pieces opposing the word and idea of discipleship, and Dr Ian Paul writing in support of the idea of discipleship. These are opinion pieces which are designed to provoke discussion and response.

Responding to the 2015 Synod, Prof Linda Woodhead's article in the Church times is an example of an opinion piece that highlights the strength of feeling throughout the Church of England as she sought to minimise discipleship as 'theologically peripheral':

Presumably, the reason that the theologically peripheral concept of "discipleship" is made to do so much work in these reports is that "following Jesus" is being used as an analogue for leadership (Jesus and clergy), and followership (laity). Sadly, this helps explain their diminished ecclesiology, with its narrowly clerical and congregational emphases. I kept feeling that they were wanting us to follow the disciples rather than Jesus.

How different it would have been if the reports had a more glorious vision of life in the Spirit, in which we are no longer mere disciples, but "partakers in the divine nature", capable of having "the mind of Christ". The gifts that we are given allow us, together, to make up the mystical body of Christ. God present not only in churches; the Spirit is poured out not only on the clergy; and leadership appears in many places (Woodhead 2015, 1).

I suggest that Woodhead has chosen to downplay the idea of discipleship because she sees it as taking something from 'the church' and putting too much emphasis on leaders, thereby somehow restricting faith and growth to the congregation. If I believe that I am a disciple of Jesus and my service is to live in a way that honours him, seeks to be obedient to biblical teaching, responds to the needs of my community and tries to be an example to others, I cannot see that it is not

about 'glorious visions of life in the Spirit'. They are not separate things. True discipleship requires the Spirit to lead, strengthen, encourage and sustain it. Disciples understand that God is present outside the walls of the church and the Spirit is at work in the world, not just clergy.

Similarly, also writing an opinion piece, in an earlier article about the same Synod, Rev Angela Tilby writes,

Discipleship is the new C-of-E-speak. It is the key theme in the papers about the Church's future, prepared for the February Synod. The assumption is that clergy and laity now need to think of themselves primarily as sharing a vocation as missionary disciples, to halt declining church numbers. I confess that I struggle with the "D" word. I use it when I have to, but always with a bad conscience. To me, it reflects the peculiarly sectarian vocabulary that has taken over the Church in recent years, and shows the influence of American-derived Evangelicalism on the Church's current leadership. To those who use such language, it is second nature; they have no idea of how odd it sounds to those Anglicans for whom "discipleship" conjures up images of Galilean fishermen with tea towels on their heads rather than a calling with which they can identify. But, more worryingly, using the language of discipleship to describe the normal Christian life does not stand up particularly well to scriptural scrutiny (Tilby 2015).

Ian Paul, writing from a more evangelical perspective in, "Is 'discipleship' Anglican?" (Paul 2018, 1) argues that a Christian leader is first of all a disciple, then a leader. Discipleship, he states, is a call to transformation. Jesus called two fishermen Simon and Andrew - they are fishermen but they are called to become fishermen. It is a process of transformation. He goes on to ask if the word discipleship is not Anglican,

What word do we claim to be authentically Anglican that sums up our calling to be a church being led and leading others into radical conversion of life, taking up your cross, faith, prayer and holiness, self-denial and the service of others, following Jesus, loving enemies, peace-making, justice, attentiveness to scripture, obedience to the divine will and being formed in the likeness of Christ (Paul 2018, 1)?

I agree with Tilby when she states that '*the language of discipleship to describe the normal Christian life does not stand up particularly well to scriptural scrutiny*' (Tilby 2015) in that there is little use of the word outside the Gospels. However, the lack of the word does not necessarily imply the concept is missing. The followers of John the Baptist were known as disciples (Mark 2:18) as were

those who followed Jesus. While the word is used narrowly for the Twelve (those named as chosen specifically by Jesus), it is also used of others who responded to his call. Luke 6:17 speaks of ‘a large crowd of his disciples’ and Luke 19:37 has ‘the whole crowd of his disciples’. Later writers use other terms e.g. saints or believers but the understanding of being called to follow Jesus through personal allegiance and exclusive loyalty is still there. Readiness to put the claims of Jesus first, regardless of the cost, goes well beyond the normal pupil-teacher relationship, yet that is what is required by Jesus and by the other New Testament writers. I believe it still is today.

One of the reports to the 2015 Synod was written by the then Bishop of Sheffield, Steven Croft. In it he recalls different periods in the history of the church ‘of significant reflection on the **central importance of discipleship**’ (Croft 2015, 4)[Emphasis mine]. He writes:

The Church in the twenty-first century faces different challenges from the early monastics in the fourth century, the Franciscans in the twelfth, the Reformers and Puritans in the sixteenth and seventeenth or the early Methodists in the eighteenth. As the Church of England in 2015 we face the challenge of calling one another afresh to follow Christ in the face of a global, secularised, materialistic culture, often experienced as a desert for the soul. We need to draw on the deep wisdom of the past but also to apply ourselves afresh to an authentic and Anglican understanding of discipleship for the 21st Century (Croft 2015, 6).

My research identified that some participants struggled with the word. I agree that there is an issue with the way the word has become associated with some sections of the church in America and its links to right wing politics. Again, I would argue that discipleship is not simply an American idea, and it is more likely that there was a more focussed and intentional push within the Anglican Communion and the Church of England to promote discipleship. I think this is confirmed by Archbishop Welby who stated in the 2015 Lambeth Lecture,

I want to start by saying just two simple sentences about the church. First, the church exists to worship God in Jesus Christ.

Second, the Church exists to make new disciples of Jesus Christ. Everything else is decoration. Some of it may be very necessary, useful, or wonderful decoration - but it’s decoration.

When I talk about making disciples as we go through, of course I'm not only talking about words; I'm also talking about actions, and we'll come back to that in a little while.

The best decision anyone can ever make, at any point in life, in any circumstances, whoever they are, wherever they are, whatever they are, is to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. There is no better decision for a human being in this life, any human being (Welby 2015).

For me, using the word is 'second nature'. As stated, it was used and taught regularly while I was growing up in the church, but I never imagined that it was only related to Jesus' disciples or the early church. I strongly agree with Welby that the best decision anyone at any age and at any time can make is to become a disciple of Jesus.

I am drawn again to Williams' comment that discipleship is '*about how we live; not just the decisions we make, not just the things we believe, but a state of being*' (Williams 2016, 1). It is about how we live. If I was to decide to become vegan, I would need to make changes in my lifestyle. I would need to stop eating meat and other things I currently enjoy, and my purchasing habits would change to support my new ideological thinking. Most people would understand and accept that changes would be necessary to accommodate my new lifestyle. For me, one of the first things about being a disciple is the decision to be one. I do not believe that people are born Christian. I believe that one must decide to 'become a Christian' or 'be Christian'. My Brethren roots include many sermons during which there was great emphasis on being 'born again'. This meant acknowledging sin in your life, realising that sin leads to death and separation from God (hell), that the only way to change that was to seek forgiveness from God through faith in Christ and inviting Jesus 'into your life' as Saviour and Lord. Consequently, there was also an emphasis on being able to identify a time when you 'made a decision' to follow Jesus.

While I still subscribe to the need to acknowledge sin, seek forgiveness and commit to follow Jesus as necessary for faith and Christian life, I also acknowledge an alternative understanding. It was only on becoming a member of the Church of Scotland that I became aware of the idea of being on a faith journey. There was no emphasis on decision-making, rather the desire was to acknowledge growing with God. This idea seemed to be particularly prevalent

among people who had ‘always gone to church’. While both are legitimate ways of becoming a believer there are issues with both. An emphasis on being ‘born again’ could result in undue pressure on people to make decisions. Given that degree of importance, making the decision is seen as a ‘once and for all’ thing. It leaves little room for doubt. It could lead to the belief that there is nothing left to do, that you are ‘saved’ and ‘everything will be fine’. I have heard that sentiment expressed. On the other hand, the idea of being on a journey could reduce the capacity for people to fully realise what they have been saved from and for. When Paul writes that ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3:23) it could be difficult for someone who has always attended church, lived well and ‘been good’ to equate that to their life. It is easy to fall into the trap of comparing sins as if there are some that are ‘worse’ than others³⁶ but I do not see where the bible separates sin into different categories. Of course, people who express their growing with God as a journey have, albeit perhaps unconsciously, decided that a relationship with God is something they want.

I think believing that Jesus is real, is able and willing to forgive, and wants to be in relationship with us is the vital first step in discipleship. Jesus’ call to follow him still requires a response. Starting with the desire for relationship, the next requirement is to find ways to strengthen that relationship. For me, that requires reading, study of and reflection on the bible, prayer and fellowship with other believers. I believe the bible is God’s word to humanity and it is important that we do our best to understand it. We see God’s interaction with people, both individuals and nations. We see his creativity and wisdom, love and compassion, righteousness and justice. We are told of his plan of salvation. There are many things in the bible that are difficult to understand and things that by today’s standards are difficult to accept and, for me, that is why we need to study it.

There is a cost to discipleship. The bible is full of stories of people who made sacrifices to be obedient God’s call. Nothing has changed, except that sacrifice and cost seem somehow minimised in the Church of Scotland e.g. the 2018 General Assembly received a Report from the Mission and Discipleship Council

³⁶ Humanly speaking I think some sins are worse than others. Genocide, murder, rape or incest are to my mind worse than stealing from work or telling lies.

(Pinkerton 2018, Section 29), a section of which was on discipleship, especially pertaining to elders. There is no mention of the cost of being a disciple. In the whole book for that year there were 237 mentions of the word cost. The majority were financial references, some were due to the search engine bringing up the word Pentecostal, one was concerned with Communion and the cost to Christ, one was about the overall cost of alcohol abuse, and one was in the RAF Chaplain's report. Yet Jesus is quite clear,

“Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” (Luke 9:23-24)

We understand that for some people the physical giving of their life has been the cost of discipleship, but for most it is more about living life with and for God rather than for yourself. I am expected to give of my time, talent and money to serve God. Luke records Jesus talking about the cost, *‘Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it’.* (Luke 6:23-24)

There is also the need for consistency. Discipleship involves ‘denying yourself and taking up your cross daily’. Discipleship is not something for weekends and special occasions. It requires stamina and commitment because it is a whole life for your whole life decision. Essentially it is deciding every day to continue to put God first. It is not easy. Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome, acknowledges that although he knows the right things to do it is often the things he knows are wrong that he does. He concludes, *‘So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me’* (Romans 7:21-23).

There is also learning by example. Jesus spent his ministry with a group of people who watched what he said and did. They learned to think differently and to try things they never thought possible. Matthew (9:35-10:42) records that Jesus ‘went through all the towns and villages, teaching...proclaiming the good

news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness'. He then writes, 'Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness', and later is added 'raise the dead'! Then in Luke 10:1-20 Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples telling them to stay where they are welcomed and leave where they are not, to eat whatever is offered, to tell the people the kingdom is near and to heal the sick. Verse 17 shows their excitement, '*The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."*' It seems that Jesus showed what to do and how to do it and then sent his disciples out to try it for themselves.

I think this is the piece that is missing in many congregations today. I have heard so many people say that their faith is private, and they do not like to talk about it. Jesus told his disciples to share the good news with people they met. He told them that they would be persecuted because of their faith in him but at the right time they would be given words to speak. He then says, 'The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters.' (Matthew 10:24-25) We are expected to share the good news in our day but so few Christians seem to be doing it. Likewise, my experience is that there are fewer and fewer times of corporate prayer in congregations and few, if any members, specifically requesting prayer. If you never see any miracles, if nobody is ever healed, if there is no experience of the supernatural in your congregation it becomes difficult to believe that it can actually happen, and there is no expectation of God working. That is borne out in Matthew 13:58 where Jesus has been teaching in his hometown but Matthew records, '*And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.*' Path of Renewal gave ministers permission to get off any pedestal people had put them on, and allowed sharing of life and learning, with encouragement to try new things. Failure was acceptable because it was more important to try than do nothing. Like the disciples, participants benefitted most when they acted on what they were learning.

Lastly, discipleship involves engaging with the community. Williams puts it succinctly,

Being where Jesus is means being in the company of the people whose company Jesus seeks and keeps. Jesus chooses the company of the excluded, the disreputable, the wretched, the self-hating, the poor, the diseased; so that is where you are going to find yourself... It is once again a reminder that our discipleship is not about choosing our company but choosing the company of Jesus - or rather, getting used to the fact of having been chosen for the company of Jesus” (Williams 2016, 11)

Just as Jesus sent his disciples into their towns and cities, he sends us today. Sometimes it means using our buildings for things other than services e.g. foodbanks, counselling or warm spaces. Sometimes it is literally going to where people are e.g. Schools, homeless shelters and local shops. Discipleship must include both the spiritual and the temporal. It is not enough to spend time in prayer and meditation, studying the bible and developing a deep relationship with God. There must also be changed lives, practical service and sacrificial giving.

4.2 Discipleship: finally, a definition.

The General Assembly of 2018 received a report from Mission and Discipleship Council and the section on discipleship begins:

The Council could spend a great deal of time seeking to agree the perfect definition of discipleship; however, our calling is not to define discipleship but to be disciples (Pinkerton 2018, 29: 2.1).

This is an interesting concept for a national committee of the Church as they promote discipleship. The following section makes it clear why they have written this, but it smacks of some of the failings of Path of Renewal where defining terms seems to lack importance. In this case it almost seems to suggest that while they could have written the perfect definition of discipleship, it is beneath them. I suspect if there is a perfect definition of discipleship we would have had it a long time ago. That there is not shows how difficult it is to define. It would have been better to miss out everything after ‘however,’ and simply go with the next section which continues:

In our work we have adopted the definition, which will be enriched by experience, from the Anglican Consultative Council which states: “Discipleship is a God-ward transformation which takes place when individuals and communities intentionally, sacrificially and

consistently live every aspect of their daily life in commitment to following Jesus Christ. It is a lifelong, whole-life reorientation which will have challenging implications for our self-identity, our belonging within community, our belief systems and our daily behaviour” (Pinkerton 2018, 29: 2.1)

I think this is an excellent working definition of discipleship and I am going to do what the committee did, adopt it³⁷. Does it still need some explanation? I think it does, but more in a ‘how to’ way. How do we live every day ‘in commitment to following Jesus Christ’? We could look at Acts 2 and what the disciples did after Pentecost. They devoted themselves to four things: the apostles teaching, fellowship, communion and prayer. Somehow, we have allowed the notion to develop that we can do all of that in one hour on a Sunday morning with communion thrown in four times a year. Devotion is about dedication, loyalty and commitment. It is about putting that person or thing first and as believers we are supposed to be devoted to God. We are told in Acts that people responded in faith because they could see the difference God made in the lives of these believers. Their love for God spilt over into love for the community such that they sold possessions to give to ‘anyone who had need’. (Acts 2:45) That is discipleship, and it takes time, effort and energy. It is not just a Sunday thing.

Perhaps one of the best-known writings on discipleship is the collection of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s lectures, published in his book ‘Discipleship’. He was aware of the argument that the word disappears from the bible after the book of Acts, but he argues that the stress on faith and commitment to Christ could not be detached from the teaching of Jesus on discipleship, because doing so would suggest that Paul knew more than Jesus. For Bonhoeffer, baptism was a vital thread as an act of faith in Christ and a way into discipleship (Bonhoeffer, Kelly, and Godsey 2003, 205-212). That link is not so strong or significant in the Church of Scotland. Bonhoeffer was concerned that even in the face of fascism there was a complacency among those who chose to abandon discipleship for a more individualistic ‘Pauline’ faith. For Bonhoeffer, discipleship means costly commitment, life in community with other believers, not just an individual relationship with Jesus. It requires effort to grow in faithfulness and taking up

³⁷ I did spend hours trying to write a clear and concise definition and struggled to come close to something like this one, let alone a perfect one.

your cross every day. There is no place for waiting for God to work or retreating to apparent safety and security. Receiving the gift of grace must bring transformation and that transformation comes by being constantly in the company of Jesus (Bonhoeffer, Kelly, and Godsey 2003, 205-212). I understand that there will be some who argue that calling for that level of commitment is too much, that it will put people off. Even Jesus found there were people who refused to commit: *From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.* (John 6:66)

As disciples we are encouraged to ‘seek first the kingdom’ [of God] (Matthew 6:33), because that draws us into the kingdom after Christ, and we pray, ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’. We seek God’s kingdom reign through Jesus and look for his transforming power in our lives and the lives of others.

4.3 One suggestion of a discipleship model

I was interested when the leaders of the Path of Renewal Process suggested to the participants that we should consider using Mike Breen’s material on missional communities and discipleship groups, or ‘huddles’ (Breen 2011, Breen 2012). I had used Breen’s book, *Building a Discipling Culture* (2011) with members of my congregation and while some of it was helpful, it also raised many questions. I appreciate the idea that discipleship needs to be intentional, integrated and informed and he provides simple concepts in the form of his ‘LifeShapes’, each of which forms a section of his book (Breen 2011). Breen identifies the main issue of the church in the West as a failure to reach people who don’t know Jesus, therefore there is no true disciple making going on. The book is divided into three parts: 1. Understanding Discipleship; 2. LifeShapes: Our Discipling Language; 3. Using Huddles to Disciple People.

Understanding Discipleship:

Breen does not directly define ‘disciple’ and we are left to assume meaning through the book. He takes a whole chapter to explain what it means to be a learner, which is effectively a disciple, arguing that discipleship involves ‘*becoming a lifelong learner of Jesus*’, which in turn means ‘*we can learn the*

ways of Jesus, doing the things he did while becoming the same type of person' (Breen 2011, 21). Being like Jesus, for Breen, means making disciples because that's what Jesus did: *'You can't be a disciple if you aren't willing to invest in and disciple others. That's simply the call of the Great Commission'* (Breen 2011, 39). Breen contends that 'making disciples' doesn't happen in the usual church setting because church leaders have not been properly taught how to make disciples (Breen 2011, 21).

LifeShapes:

Breen explains that developing a discipling culture requires us to learn a new language. This language consists of eight geometric shapes, known as 'LifeShapes', each of which has a short explanation and which he insists should become widely used by those seeking to make disciples (Breen 2011, 49). Breen argues that these geometric symbols sync with the image-based culture in which we live and:

'... we store large amounts of information, stories and data by attaching them to images. Our brains are literally wired differently than they were a hundred years ago. Our memories are stored and encoded in ways that they weren't in either the oral or written cultures. ... Because of this, the idea of attaching the teachings of Jesus and Scripture to a few basic images is perfectly in line with how our brains are already hardwired' (Breen 2011, 50-51).

These LifeShapes are presented as being vital to the process of creating a culture where disciples are created (Breen 2011, 180), and that LifeShapes should become Huddle members' 'everyday language' and their lives should 'look like the shapes have been incarnated' (Breen 2011, 186). He argues that it is reasonably easy to create a corporate culture by developing

'a whole system of language revolving around the central beliefs that we have... There are ways that you address your superiors that are acceptable and ways that are not. There are ways to treat you co-workers and ways you don't. Certain clothes are okay while others aren't. Certain work hours are required... Everyone knows the language, and everyone uses the language. When people share **all these things** and have them all in common, a culture is created. The language does not have to be completely verbal, for as we know, much of our communication is non-verbal.' (Breen 2011, 47-48 Emphasis mine)

The problem is that if LifeShapes are the language of creating a discipling culture, they cannot be enough on their own. 'All these things' suggest that that learned behaviour, cultural norms and societal expectations also play a part. These LifeShapes may also have an impact on how people understand the bible. Breen identifies himself as an 'orthodox Christian leader' (Breen 2011, 9) which would suggest that he has a high regard for the bible, and he certainly states that in-depth bible study is important (Breen 2011, 32). However, it appears that he insists that we add this other language in order to properly understand discipleship - despite never defining what he means by the term. He states that Jesus '*was the most brilliant leader of all time*' (Breen 2011, 76), and his whole premise is based on Jesus' command to 'make disciples', yet there is no suggestion that Jesus employed a special language to 'make' his disciples.

Huddles:

This is the mechanism for discipling present and future leaders and Breen suggests that the twelve apostles were Jesus' first huddle (Breen 2011, 69). Each huddle is essentially a small group of four to ten people, invited by the leader to meet together for a set period of time. Huddle leaders are not facilitators, they are the primary discipler and they invite members to '*imitate the parts of their lives that look like the life and ministry of Jesus*'. Membership of a huddle is to be understood as a privilege, not a right, and there is an extremely high expectation of commitment (Breen 2011, 171-172). Initially, members are discouraged from interjecting until they '*know the language and their lives show it*' (Breen 2011, 187). Every time a huddle meets members are to answer two questions:

'What is God saying to me? What am I going to do about it?' (Breen 2011, 51)

I understand that it would be difficult to constantly be knocked off topic by having to answer questions or to hear opinions from participants. However, it is surely not wrong for a participant to seek a clear idea of expectations and to know how and where the bible fits into what is being taught. I suspect that this style is what suits Breen best, as he states:

Yet when we start on a new trail, we need a strong confident leader to show us the way. There will be time for consensus, for gathering and listening to opinions from those who follow you, but that time is not at the beginning. ... It is imperative to recognize what the beginning of leadership requires. Jesus revealed this in his character and his style of leadership. Are we better leaders than he? Resist the urge to endlessly explain what you are doing or to get feedback from those following. Lay out your plan and stick with it. If people want to follow you, they will. If not, they can get on board somewhere else. (Breen 2011, 103)

If the leader chooses the members, it would be easy to leave out those who might be sceptical or challenging and select only those who seem malleable. The phrase, 'they can get on board somewhere else' comes across as harsh and that such a person is not worthy of the time of the leader.

I have a sympathy with Breen's argument that as church we do the business of church as if we still live in an age that is long gone. Christendom is gone but the old habits have not. His answer is a Christian community committed to making disciples. I believe that is only part of the story, not the whole as Breen would suggest.

The idea of a leader spending time discipling other leaders who in turn disciple others sounds appealing. Again, I must confess a bias as I have used this material in the past with a group from my congregation, with mixed results. We found the later LifeShapes didn't work as well as the early ones, and I felt that the Bible references he used to back them up were often taken out of context and almost made to fit. Sharing in the huddle was the most effective area for that group and trying to answer the questions, "what is God saying to me and what am I going to do about it?" encouraged prayer and reflection between huddle meetings.

I feel that he has needlessly complicated something that could be as effective in its simplicity. He states that '*you may be accused of showing favouritism to some while abandoning others*' (Breen 2011, 16) and that was my experience. The process could easily have become divisive and caused friction. I will take the idea of a huddle on again, but I will be more careful to consider how the participants may be perceived by others and avoid the LifeShapes. For me there

needs to be more collegiality rather than a single leader on whom everything is focussed.

With my previous experience of Breen's practices and my reservations about his model, I decided not to use the whole model with my own group. I do think there are parts of the model that are helpful, and I might return to them in different circumstances.

In considering how people mature within congregations and groups, Nick Ladd's research showed some similarities with my research. He interviewed people who had been involved with the practice of 'dwelling in the word' and 'dwelling in the world' (Ladd uses the awkward abbreviation DitWorld!) which Ladd describes as *a practice grounded in assumptions about the presence and activity of God in the wider world* (Ladd 2020, 99). He explains that

DitWorld encourages an outward-focussed attention to people's communities and gives confidence by building faith in God's already present activity in people's lives before the congregation enters their orbit. Rather than seeing people as projects upon which to focus evangelistic efforts, DitWorld encourages the congregation to be on the look-out for people of peace - people who share and approve of things they might regard as kingdom values and, as a further stage, partners who might join with the congregation in activities that both see as worthwhile (Ladd 2020, 99).

My local group did not engage with DitWorld but had a similar experience when thinking about *Surprise the world: the five habits of highly missional people* (Frost 2015). Ladd states that the initial stages of the DitWorld process were difficult and 'strongly resisted' by participants but with time and training they were able to speak more positively about the experience. My Path of Renewal group experienced the same initial reluctance and hesitation in engaging with the community, that is until they got to know each other better. This shared experience and deepening relationship was significant. Ladd also found that people spoke of the home group as a '*comfortable space*'...(where) *they were accepted and could be themselves*' (Ladd 2020, 108). He continues,

Home groups were places of mutual support and pastoral care - relationships in which they have found strength, belonging, comfort and counsel in the ups and downs of life.

CC: We've been able to share with each other and support and encourage each other and we've told people things that we perhaps wouldn't tell people generally. But speaking personally, it's been a great comfort.

They were also seen as places of learning - for growth in knowledge and understanding. Though one or two people tended to take the lead in this, others were encouraged to participate and take a turn at leading. Home group was a safe place to try this (Ladd 2020, 108).

In this description he could easily be describing my local Path of Renewal group, and the process more generally. Ladd's research takes us back to the discussion in earlier chapters on the difference between attractional and missional:

So far, I have charted an outward journey to the church's wider community (and to individuals' personal communities). This had developed a more recognisable public identity for the church and led some to re-evaluate their understanding of mission in terms of partnership and mutual hospitality and recalibrate evangelism as something less transactional and more relational and dialogic. In support of this, some of them had initiated a new type of small group to facilitate and continue to foster this outward relational journey that they had begun to identify and value. Those who were uneasy with this journey were more inclined to see the church community as something to protect and that hospitality was to be offered on the church's territory through which people might hopefully be drawn into the church (Ladd 2020, 118).

Ladd acknowledges that the 'conflict' between the two groups '*invited questions about the nature of discipleship*' but he limits the discussion of discipleship to '*its root meaning of learning*' (Ladd 2020, 118). I suspect this is because Ladd is focussed on learning together as the process of communal maturity, yet the outcomes appear to be very similar to those of Path of Renewal. My research identified that participation in the Path of Renewal process encouraged deeper relationships within the groups and increased desire to engage with those outside the church. Ladd confirms that outcome in his work:

For those who have been open to and learnt to practice reflection and discernment, there have been a range of impacts which are not easy to map in a simple causal way, but nevertheless come together in a picture of growing maturity; I mention some key themes now. First, being involved together in seeking to discern God's call generated impetus to relate to the 'other' in new and more relational ways that we have seen earlier in this chapter (Ladd 2020, 137)

Ladd summarises his research and there are two comments in particular that resonated with my experience of Path of Renewal: first, he notes that

From the data, it seemed that maturation was generated by the agency of God and that where St X began to open up to this through communal spiritual practices, growth and transformation took place through interdependent relationships (Ladd 2020, 171).

My own experience was that the more time we spent on shared spiritual practices the deeper our relationships became. Ladd continues,

what this research has demonstrated is that communities too are invited by God on a journey of maturation and that they can open up to this through communal spiritual practices, in which they learn genuine openness towards the many ‘others’ in their life. This communal journey, in turn, enables growth in the personal journey of individuals, liberated by their participation in open community for a new kind of relationship with the ‘other’ (Ladd 2020, 172).

Again, across Scotland, Path of Renewal groups learned together, shared together, grew in faith and were more open to mission and outreach. What Ladd refers to as maturation is very similar in character to what I have referred to as discipleship. This suggests that there are different ways to classify similar behaviours and outcomes, however, I want the church to reclaim the word discipleship. Yes, it needs to be explained. Yes, there are people who do not like it, but what other word could be used that is better? Whatever words are used an explanation is needed e.g. what does it mean to ‘follow Jesus’? What is a ‘Jesus lover’? One of the Path of Renewal participants, Grace, started the process unsure and hesitant about the term discipleship but during interview stated, *“But you know, it’s learning that discipleship is okay. And the word is actually okay. It takes time.”* With teaching, reflecting and experience it is possible for people to understand what discipleship really is. I believe the church needs to own it, explain it and live it.

5 Chapter 5: Where they were, what they did and where they ended up.

This chapter will consider participant responses at interview, dividing answers into three areas: understanding the congregations, the previous experience of participants before the process and how groups were formed; how the groups functioned during the process; and, the outcomes of the process for congregations and individuals, including whether lasting change has been achieved. In order to distinguish which group the respondent is a member of, the term 'minister' will be used for respondents who are ministers and 'elders'³⁸. Anonymised names have been used to identify individual participant responses. Areas of commonality and difference in response between the two groups will be identified. Finally, critical themes for later examination will be identified.

5.1 Where they were: understanding the congregations and previous experience of participants before the process.

As detailed in chapter 2, the research was carried out with eighteen participants. There were nine elders representing five congregations and eight ministers representing a further seven congregations. Both an elder and minister represented one congregation. In addition, one member of the Panel on Review and Reform participated.

At the commencement of the process, the congregations represented had four ministers who were less than two years in post, five were between five and seven years in post, and three were more than ten years in post. During the

³⁸ for all others, as all but one of the other participants were elders.

three years of the process, the minister of one participating congregation left the denomination and four others moved to a new charge.

In the elders' group, all but one were elders. All were involved in the life of their congregations before their involvement in the Path of Renewal process. Three were Session Clerks,³⁹ three others had been involved in leading worship in their congregations and all were involved in different committees, youth work or on the audio-visual team.

When asked to describe their congregations before the Path of Renewal process, the ministers gave varying answers around a common theme. One had completed a building project with their congregation and needed to move from a focus on buildings to a focus on people. Others, newer in post, sensed the need to identify vision and purpose. The rest identified a sense of 'stagnation', 'being stuck' or 'lacking direction'.

In explaining why they chose to get involved with the process, elders used phrases such as; *'interaction with others'*, *'we were already on the way'*, *"it wasn't one size fits all"*, *'we couldn't do it alone'*, *'doing church differently'*, *'we had to reach out in new ways'*, *'it was to be more about discipleship'*, *'because church is more than just Sunday'*, *'we were trying to be missional anyway'*, *'I felt challenged to do something new'*, and even, *'I'm not sure'*. Adam stated, *"We could see that if the church went on as it was going... the church locally will be finished... so we wanted to explore new ways of being church."* Three responded positively to the state of the congregation, and the others were concerned for their future. Adam stated, *"we wanted to explore new ways of being church"*. Alison was very positive, stating, *"my initial concern was that I never think that a one size fits all thing is good...As a church, it was the ideal opportunity for us."* Debbie indicated she was, *"trying to find my place"*. Two spoke of the need to involve people in more than Sunday mornings.

There was a clear recognition in both groups that if things stayed as they were, the congregation, perhaps even the wider church, would not survive in the long

³⁹ Session Clerks are often viewed as second in charge after the minister and have significant responsibility for ensuring the smooth running of the Kirk Session.

term. That was not a surprise given that these were congregations which had been chosen to participate because they had identified a need to do things differently. Neither was it surprising that every minister spoke of the need for change to find new vision or purpose for their congregations, even those who had been in post for several years. Two who were new to the congregation spoke of the fact that their congregations had indicated a willingness to change in their Parish Profiles (during vacancies).⁴⁰

In describing what, as ministers, they found attractive about the Path of Renewal process, the recurring ideas were: '*empowering members*', '*moving away from a focus on ordained ministry*', '*the benefits of networking*', '*the availability of support*', and '*fresh start*'. Harold summed up the general sense, stating,

“There were two different schools of thought within our joint Kirk Sessions. One was, well, we can try. And the other one was, well, we can try. And that pretty much sums it up to some who are thinking, well, we're near the end of the road. We've tried everything. Nothing's working. We're not getting back to the Sunday school of eighty so what can we do? Others were saying let's look at new models. Let's look at new ways of being church where we're reinventing what we're doing. Where we're following where the Spirit leads us. And let's do it with enthusiasm.”

It is interesting to note that the requirement for Kirk Sessions to have agreed to participate in the process does not appear to have affected the outcome regardless of which 'we can try' perspective they started on. The congregations whose Kirk Session started from the perspective of having 'tried everything else, so we might as well give this a go' seem to have fared as well as those that started off more positively.

There was no clear pattern to answers about what elders expected to gain from their participation. Only one gave a personal answer, "*a more rounded me*". Two talked about spreading the load among members. Brian was seeking "*a confirmation that we were travelling on the right road*", and "*about finding out how to witness as individual members and as a church.*" Six of nine talked about

⁴⁰ In reality, every Parish Profile indicates that the congregation is willing to change, usually because the authors know that to suggest otherwise would result in no applications.

being more missional and gaining confidence for outreach. Becky spoke of, “*doing church in a different way*” and “*...courage to think out of the box.*” She also responded, “*once we were on Path of Renewal, we realised we had to change ourselves first.*”

Both groups identified that what was missing was participation in mission and outreach. Both groups stated that more people needed to be involved, but the elders specifically identified a need for training, leading to increased confidence.

When ministers were asked if discipleship had been a focus of their ministry prior to Path of Renewal, Grace commented,

“when you suddenly said we’re not doing this we’re doing discipleship, I said, stuff it, it’s too late, so we started, and we just kept carrying on, because that was the right thing to do... I have all sorts of connotations to the word discipleship and it’s not a good word.”

Grace later stated, “*But you know, it’s learning that discipleship is okay. And the word is actually okay. It takes time.*” Two more were reluctant to use the word discipleship, Liam commenting,

“So at the end of all of this process as we’ve talked through discipleship I thought, that’s what I’ve been doing, but I would never have called it that. You know, accompany maybe, walking together maybe, but never discipleship.”

Charlie suggested that using the word was problematic because it was associated more with a particular evangelical background. The rest were more positive about using the word as a focus of their ministry. Charlie summed up the main idea by stating,

“it’s always been a focus of my ministry, but I couldn’t say with any confidence that’s always the focus of the life of the average church..... Path of Renewal, to some extent, has given us a vehicle for doing that more easily than possibly in the past.”

Given the mixed response by ministers regarding their focus on teaching about discipleship, it is unsurprising that the elders’ understanding of discipleship varied. Two of the nine said they would not have heard the word used in church.

Alison stated, “*discipleship to me is getting out there, and spreading the word of God, but I do understand that to a lot of people what was actually coming into the church was discipleship.*” Ethel identified the suspicion that her view ‘was probably quite narrow’: “*back then it was just someone that followed Jesus.*” Debbie had a different picture in mind:

I still had that picture when I talk about, or talked about, it—of the disciples of Jesus—the followers of Jesus, the 12 men, the original..... I still had this traditional view of, in my head, that I can't be a disciple because I'm not worthy enough of it, not in the right place.

Three spoke of the need to learn from others and implement it. Adam argued, “*Being a disciple is to help to bring other people into that body [the church] and people that already have, help move them on in their relationship with Jesus.*” Eric took that idea further:

“Discipleship to me is the expectation that you will learn from someone you are discipled to. But also that you will disciple others and you will pass on what you have learned. So that it's not just that you're receiving all the time, and that's it. “Great. That's it. I've had my bit of discipleship this weekend, and I'll be great till next week.” No, no, hang on a second. What are you going to do with that? You need to pass that on to disciple others and bring them on to the stage that you're at now, as you move on to the stage that the person you're discipled to is on.”

When asked if they would have called themselves a disciple prior to the process, there was some similarity in responses between the two groups. Three elders and two ministers said yes. Two elders and four ministers said no. Three elders indicated they would like to have said yes but were unsure. One elder indicated they did not know. One minister said they would not have used the word, and another that it would have been used “*as an aspirational term in terms of movement away from membership.*” Further to that, the ministers who would not have called themselves disciples indicated various reasons for that: church and family background, lack of familiarity with the concept/term, and unhappiness with the word and how it has been used in the past. Four respondents spoke of a sense of unworthiness. They felt that they were not good enough to be called disciples.

When asked to relate their understanding of discipleship to their own life and faith the overwhelming response from the elders was that it involves doing and being. Duncan identified that it's not just for church or Sunday:

“I don't think church is necessarily the best box to put it into because that leaves the other six days empty, doesn't it. And so I see it as something very relevant to the other six days of the week beyond a Sunday. That has helped me crystallise more beyond a Sunday to the challenge of actually being a disciple. What does that mean Duncan and what are you doing about it?”

This sentiment was acknowledged by Brian:

“I suppose it's really just about in everything you do not just when you are together with people of the church, living a life that people can see that has been affected by your beliefs and also be willing to talk about what you believe, and why you believe it.”

Significantly, even those who, prior to the process, would not have called themselves disciples, or were unsure about it, were able to speak positively, choosing the word relationship rather than discipleship. In particular, Duncan expressed it as:

“It's a relationship thing as you said earlier on. And you can have all the book knowledge, and all the theories and all the rest of it; but if you don't have the relationship? I think that's what makes a disciple. Yes, that relationship, never mind all the theories and the teaching, and all the rest of it..... we have to learn from each other, and we're sharing, and everyone's come with different experiences, and you're at different stages of that relationship. And discipleship is a little bit about passing that on and helping other people on that journey.”

The elders were asked to share any previous experience they had with other transformation, church growth or discipleship processes. Five of nine had participated in or were in congregations that had used the Alpha Course. One had used materials specifically focussed on discipleship from the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity. Two had been involved in G12 cell groups which had a focus on discipleship. This is a structural mechanism for church membership rather than a specific process. One was continuing to use ideas from the 3DM organisation, particularly around the formation of a discipleship culture in a congregation and identifying new leaders (Breen 2011, Breen 2012). Two had no previous experience of other processes.

We will come back to the issue of discipleship; however, it is significant that even people who have been in ministry for years are uncomfortable with the term. In Matthew 28, Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples themselves, baptising them into the family of believers and instructing them to obey Jesus' teaching. I have indicated that my own upbringing in Brethren congregations was such that making disciples was emphasised and I confess to a struggle to understand why the concept is so difficult for some.

When questioned, none of the ministers felt they had a good understanding of what was involved in the process when they agreed to participate. There was general agreement that this was not necessarily a negative but was an understandable consequence and acceptable part of the process. Fiona stated, *"It was something that was going to develop as we developed it... that was part of the excitement of it, even the frustration, that was actually really worthwhile."* Gordon stated that, *"we weren't sitting under the tutelage of people who had worked it out, or thought they'd worked it out and were just telling you how to do things. It was very much a corporate engagement with concepts and ideas...that mutuality...made it far more hopeful."* In comparing previous experience with Path of Renewal Charlie commented, *"...the collegiality was something that we longed for and was missing, and here we were actually having a situation where we would experience that."*

Again, there is no surprise that there was uncertainty around the process. Sam, representing the committee, states:

"I suppose there was no kind of master plan. What there was, we knew that initially we had to talk about where we were as a culture in Scotland, and how the church fit into that. So that kind of that gave us a natural place to start with our first conference. At that conference we kind of picked up from folk what they knew. I mean, had they done any training in generational characteristics? Had they done training in leadership? We were kind of listening to that and working out what we would have input on in future conferences."

Sam's response when it was suggested that the leaders seemed to be 'just a week or two ahead' of the ministers was surprising:

"Absolutely, we were reading books, and then making up programmes, teaching programmes around those books, and trying to keep in touch

with what was happening in the States, and, you know, just trying to get the latest theories, if you like, on mission and discipleship. So absolutely, we were just a few steps ahead. And while that's about where we were in the whole kind of missional landscape. I also think it was valuable that, none of those, who were teaching, were coming in as experts. It's not as if here's what we've done and here's what will work for you."

And also,

"That was us scrabbling about looking to see who is writing on these things, who we can learn from, and we recognise that the stuff that Cairn was doing in discipleship was crucial. So we got Rich to teach that for us. We read Tod's book (Bolsinger 2015), and realised this is about leadership, let's - and of course, he was delighted to come to Scotland, you know, which is a huge thing. So, it was about finding the friendly faces with the experience and the teaching expertise at the right time.

From a personal perspective this method was both frustrating and liberating at the same time. There was no clear plan for the duration of the process, and it was obvious that was the case. Most of the ministers were used to having a plan or programme and some spoke of the need to move away from that, however uncomfortable that felt. Lack of a clear plan made it particularly difficult to explain the process to people in the congregation, but it also allowed innovation and creativity. The saying, "It's a movement, not a programme" began to be used by those involved.

In summary, the participants were in congregations which recognised that they needed help, that things were not as they should be. Interestingly there was a difference between ministers and elders. Ministers appear to have 'big picture' issues: lack of momentum, vision or purpose while elders were more concerned to have something that would enhance what was already there. Any concerns about the lack of a set plan or clearly identified process were ameliorated by the positive experience of the ministers and the content of the teaching.

Participants were frustrated at times; however, they were able to accept that because they knew this was a pilot process and their experience would shape the process for future participants. Clearly the involvement of one of the main committees of the Church played a crucial role in allowing congregations to 'buy in' to the process.

These responses raise the question of the value of the process. Is it worth persevering in trying to change one congregation if the whole structure is perceived as being not only unwilling to change, but actively seeking to maintain the status quo? My experience is that even among congregations that have been identified as being willing to change there are people, sometimes in significant numbers, who will be at best passive in their involvement in the process. They will not actively resist, but they will want to watch and wait to see what change there is before making their mind up as to its value. Each congregation is likely to have a few who will actively resist any change. Despite that, for the ministers involved in the process there was acceptance of the comment by one, “We're not about saving the church, we're about building the kingdom of God.”

5.2 What they did: the groups during the process

There is no one answer to the question, “What did they do and how did they do it?” Choosing participants, frequency of meeting, type of meeting and content of meetings were very varied with congregations in similar locations approaching the process differently. I believe this was both a strength and a weakness of the process. It was a weakness in that it provoked a sense of uncertainty. Ministers were unsure if they were doing the right thing and choosing the right people and we'll see that, occasionally, the answer was no. However, there is not always a ‘right’ way and participants had to learn that. The strength of having different approaches is that it can be tailored to the specific location, people and experience of potential participants. Path of Renewal was, from the beginning, promoted as flexible and adaptable, taking account of local circumstances. Unlike Purpose Driven Church or the Alpha Course it is not a ‘one size fits all’ approach. Some participants found it difficult to adjust to that.

The elders group consisted of people who were already active in their congregations and that seven of nine had some additional experience of teaching, learning and action regarding discipleship, even although they may not have used that word. This is not surprising given that a variety of options were

used by ministers in identifying group members and group size. Harold, reflecting on the early stages of the process and the first input to ministers, stated,

“we were encouraged to go away and reflect on who would likely be asked, but not to ask them. And then when we came back for the second one, and we realised it was a slightly more discipleship orientated labour to take, we were sent away to think through it again.”

Seven of the eight went through this sort of process, praying and reflecting and then asking people to participate. One allowed an element of self-selection. One started by inviting the Kirk Session and Congregational Board members but found that the time commitment was too great, and none ended up on the group. The time commitment was an issue for seven of the groups, however, P1 identified one of the keys talked about in the prelude to the process starting:

“the biggest thing I appreciated from the Path of Renewal was the idea that if you're going to start something new, you have to stop something existing. So you don't totally overburden yourself.”

All had a range of ages in their groups, each of which numbered between four and ten.

Only two identified specific problems with the identification of participants. Gordon specifically identified people on the margins of the congregation and hoped that their participation would draw them into the centre, however, he states,

“...very quickly, we ran on to the rocks of certain members of the Session disapproving quite strenuously, that they were somehow excluded from this as a process, and it got quite nippy at some points. I think they felt they wanted to be part of it, but they hadn't been asked, so their noses were out of joint.”

The result was the formation of a second group and,

“we carried the themes that Path of Renewal had started to explore into the broader life of the Session, so that they felt that they were included although not specifically have to give up more time to be part of the group. This element was not successful with some 'drifting away and others falling out'.

The second problem involved an existing group that had been set up to investigate and implement ideas arising from the Church Without Walls Report.

Liam stated,

“Our congregation had a Church Without Walls group in existence and probably the bulk of them became the Path of Renewal team. However, I think the choice of people was probably not a good one and so for us as a Path of Renewal team it hasn't worked all that well.”

A further issue was identified. Two of the group “*were thinking about church membership, and rather than doing a membership course, we thought the Path of Renewal team was a good way of exploring discipleship and what it means to be church.*” The difference between membership and discipleship is one that will be discussed in the next chapter. While this is an interesting concept it is not one I would have adopted. For me, teaching about membership involves four one-hour sessions, not a prolonged process. It is possible to be a member of the church without being a disciple, and vice versa. One benefit of the process is that congregations approached it differently, Harold took the opposite view, ‘my principal concern was to *move them from a membership mindset to a discipleship mindset.*

A participant in a linked charge⁴¹ identified that their two congregations were very different and that the smaller, older congregation did not ‘buy in’ to the process. With hindsight they stated that it would have been better to wait until both were ready to participate.

With regard to the size and make-up of the groups Sam confirmed that advice had been given:

“we talked about numbers in the group, maybe anything between four and eight. We talked about the characteristics we'd be looking for in those people, and the main thing was their capacity to be able to give the time and effort it needed.”

Having made the suggestion, Sam was then able to identify that some ministers asked for volunteers while others asked specific people. From Sam's perspective

⁴¹ A linked charge is where two or more congregations share a minister whilst maintaining their own Kirk Session etc.

this made no difference to the outcomes of the process. What Sam noticed was that some ministers who acted quickly found that when the focus changed to discipleship they had the wrong people, while those who asked for volunteers sometimes found that those people were not willing to engage in a helpful way. Sam states, ‘where ministers sat a bit looser to it and their group was more fluid, I think, was where it had the most traction and there's longevity.’

Two ministers ended up meeting individuals rather than in a group setting. I find it difficult to accept that a series of meetings with individuals is a group meeting. If anything, it is even more clearly discipling than being together in a group, but it lacks the dynamic of meeting together in a group. I understand the necessity, but I question that it meets the aim of Path of Renewal.

No group had an agreed format, choosing instead a variety of styles, bible studies and books. One minister, Fiona, admitted mixed feelings in leading the group stating, *“I dreaded it every month and came away from it, so blessed by everything that they'd been saying, and just how excited they were at learning.* Another, Liam, tried books specifically related to discipleship but found, *“...its language was very unfamiliar to most of the people in the group. And so it made it very difficult to work it through.*

It was suggested by two ministers, and agreed by the rest, that there was a clear, and significant, change in direction of the teaching input after three to four months, moving away from a focus on being missional to focussing on discipleship. One stated, *“when we started, there was almost a bit of a false start as to which route we were going down. And that, that made it actually really quite genuine that this was about finding our own way.”* Another agreed, *“we've been looking at this and been thinking it's about mission but actually we need to deal with discipleship first of all.”* One elder clearly identified a change of attitude in the first months of the process stating, *“We started off wanting to change the community and realised we needed to change ourselves first.”*

Sam stated that initially there was no master plan for teaching because the full-time staff member, along with committee members, was to be involved in identifying key areas with, and in response to, participant's experience. As a result, Sam recognised a move toward discipleship but did not see that as having

the significance ascribed to it by the participants. Having agreed that the process would develop as it proceeded, the participants might have expected a change in focus. However, the move from missional/attractational models of church to discipleship seems to have been so significant that it became a pivotal moment. One minister stated,

“what we’ve dealt with so far won't be wasted, it will be something which we can work with. So, I think it was a humility in the organisation of Path of Renewal and an openness to change direction as required as well. That that was freeing for us as well.”

Time was the main issue for all participants. Lack of availability prohibited some groups meeting together at all, and some people who might have become involved chose not to because of the time commitment. It should not have been a surprise though, as encouraging ministers to give up an existing work or hobby in order to make time for this process was highlighted from the beginning. If, having identified the need for change we cannot encourage enough people to sacrifice the time needed to bring about that change, serious questions need to be asked about the future of the Church.

The idea of being sacrificial with time seems not to have been taken on by a significant portion of the participants, however, for me it is crucial to the success or failure of the process in the long term. These first groups on the process were in congregations that had already proved they had changed or were in the process of changing. If that group struggled to find enough people who were willing to give the time required to meet sacrificially to give themselves the best chance of succeeding, what hope is there that congregations that are already struggling with change could find people to participate? There is the dilemma for the wider church: we know we need to change and yet there is no evidence of a commitment to do what is necessary to bring change about. Participants suggest that even this process, having been instigated specifically to encourage congregations to pursue change, could not engender the enthusiasm and commitment required from participants.

5.3 Where they ended up: the outcomes of the process.

5.3.1 Differences in the understanding of discipleship

When the ministers were asked what had changed in their understanding of discipleship the three who would have called themselves disciples said their understanding had not changed. Four made no comment. One commented,

“it’s maybe made me see it clearer and I think it’s given me a deeper understanding of, well, that discipleship is much more than just what Jesus and the twelve did, you know, it’s not just about this superhuman who is a disciple. That, in fact, we should all be disciples.

Seven of nine elders said their understanding had changed and that discipleship was something they understood more fully. The other two both stated that they understood discipleship prior to the process, therefore it would be reasonable for there to be little change, however, one indicated that he was *‘more aware of a sense of responsibility for the church family here.’* The other stated, *‘I feel like my understanding of discipleship hasn’t changed hugely. But yes, I would be more willing to call myself—to other people—a disciple.’*

Having previously identified an antipathy⁴² to the term disciple among some ministers it is not surprising that there seems to have been little change in that group. It is encouraging to see that the elders were much more willing to embrace the idea as well as the word.

5.3.2 Differences in the practice of faith

It is clear that some ministry respondents struggled to identify changes in themselves, and that may be because they were people who were already committed to the congregation and actively involved in the life and witness of the church. Most found it easier to identify changes in other people.

⁴² There were various reasons given for antagonism or hesitancy around the term: for one it was negative personal history; for another it was misunderstanding of the breadth of the term i.e. not limited to Jesus’ twelve disciples; and, for another the term was associated with a different, “more evangelical” section of the church.

Seven of nine elders identified changes in themselves as a result of participation in the process. Ethel was clear that her confidence had improved:

“I mean, the very fact that I took or led the Bible study, and it's an easy bible study, because of the women that are there, they kind of take over. The very fact that I was willing to prepare some material for them. I could never have done that before Path of Renewal. So it was Path of Renewal that gave me the confidence to be able to go, and for Judy to say, “I'm away next week. Will you do it?” Otherwise I would just have said no. You know, somebody else can do that better than I can. And I still think they maybe could, but I'm willing to do it. And to try. And I would never have done that.”

In other group members:

Asked to identify specific changes in members of their group both elders and ministers offered a mixed response. One identified that the main part of his group remained unaffected by their involvement in the process, however, he added,

“The real change we saw was actually in the Session. They bought into it even though they weren't directly a part of it. There was an eagerness to change, to try new things. And the problem was reigning them in rather than releasing them. It was trying to give them a bit more focus and direction, so it was perhaps not the expected outcomes...”

Another mixed response came from an elder who encapsulated an issue identified by two ministers:

“I have maybe never felt that confident so I hoped it would do that for me and be less scary to share that with other people. And, and I think on the whole I've done more of that than I would have done before. I think it's been hugely inspiring, beneficial, but in a sense, the breakdown is trying to enthuse a body that doesn't really want to be enthused by it.”

Other, overwhelmingly positive, comments were made on different outcomes:

Freedom and liberation -

- “I think it liberated one or two in the group to exercise their ministry, their giftedness more openly and recognise it more openly.”
- “They have been given much more liberation to go and experiment and have tried a number of different things that they would never have done. There’s much more community involvement now which needs to grow bigger and deeper but what we are now doing many more things within our community than we were before. That’s all down to seeing Path of Renewal as a way or re-engaging with the community.
- I think there's quite a few folks in the group [about] who you can sit and go, “Wow, the change in that person over that time period.” And they probably don't see themselves because it's hard to see yourself changing.

Open and encouraging -

- “My group of seven that we spoke about actually spawned another small group, which was almost textbook in a sense. And that was really encouraging and it excited me because it was an indication that the hope that we had was actually taking place in reality - to some extent, anyway”.
- “I’ve certainly seen folk being more at ease with their faith and they’re more open about talking about their faith now.”
- “We had about a year of vacancy. I was on the vacancy committee then, I think, in that time we actually learned that as a small group of elders, we could keep things moving fairly well. And that gave us a bit of self-confidence, self-belief I think.”

Life changing -

- “We have one or two individuals for whom it has been absolutely life changing in terms of their faith and their growth and in terms of how they walk that out practically. Both within the group and again from outside we had a new member who has only come into the Church of Scotland under Path of Renewal terms. And so when she started up something, she immediately started thinking about how could I do this in a Path of Renewal way.”
- “...there are individuals here who are absolutely getting it. And that is changing their faith, changing the way they see their Christian life, and they're coming up - they're generating ideas, they're wanting to try those ideas and are coming to their minister as the point of permission giving.”

Frame of reference

- “...it's become the frame of reference for so much of how we are and then by extension what we choose to be.”
- “...my actions are more informed by my faith than they were before I got involved in Path of Renewal.”

Overall, members of the group have been encouraged in their faith, using words like confidence, trying new things, intentional, permission giving, inspiring and beneficial to describe the outcomes of the process. All of the participants received personal benefit of some sort from their involvement in the process. Of itself that is a significant success for the process.

In the congregation:

The results for the congregation were not so clearly identifiable although some changes were apparent with Debbie commenting, “I think there are some people coming forward, getting involved, that maybe wouldn't have previously. I've seen some people saying, again, in [local area], “I want to be a part of that” without waiting to be asked.” Ethel was also able to articulate differences in people in the congregation, stating,

“I've seen a change in other people within the church. I've seen other people grow in faith. I've seen other people pray in a different way, read their bibles and participate in the bible studies? You know, I think it's had an impact on the people who have been part of Path of Renewal and we've carried that into these other groups.”

Adam identified an issue that others acknowledged as relevant to some in their own congregations,

I think they're open to new ideas, but they don't want to have it imposed on them every Sunday. They want to, the older ones want to cling on to that traditional way of doing things to a large extent, but they are generally very supportive if we try to do something new or different.

Alison also identified a reluctant acceptance with the wider congregation, again amongst older people,

Again, it's probably an age thing. As you'll know yourself there are those who don't, just will not get involved. They do come along, and they realise things are changing. Some embrace it, some don't. We've never seen any form of exodus as a result of it. So that's a... that people are tolerating it and hopefully it will, they will see that it is a ministry.

5.3.3 Did it bring cultural change?

The Path of Renewal process sought to bring cultural change in the congregation and, for two of the participants that was not clearly identifiable. One minister in a linked charge who had moved to a new charge during the process, stated,

“...I didn't see cultural change, but [after he left] I was told there was definitely a much more relaxed atmosphere within the church but the smaller part, the smaller congregation, the rural one kind of dug into the tradition and that kind of made life difficult. But I had two entirely different reactions via the same process and the same minister if you like...”

Of course, what is not addressed is whether the ‘more relaxed atmosphere’ has come because that minister left rather than as a result of the process. Being able to identify specific changes that have come about because of Path of Renewal proved difficult. One minister, starting the process within a short time of taking up the charge, stated,

“...it's really hard for either the congregation or us to know what - it's hard for me to know for sure there's cultural change, because I wasn't there before. But I'll take them on trust that there is when they say that, but they don't know whether to lay that at my door, at Path of Renewal door, at just the change of times and the fact that, you know, they bought the message that change has to happen. It's hard to know exactly where to put that.”

Another stated,

“the overwhelming response was, we're a wee bit disappointed because we thought you were going to tell us what the solution was. And I think they're now getting the idea as we're progressing with the second - our own personal second trench of group members - they're slowly getting the idea that it is indeed a movement and not a programme.”

Others had a more positive experience and recognised changes within their congregation.

One had recently moved to another charge but stated,

“It gave them more permission to lead the change rather than look to me to lead the change. So, the proof for them and whether it's been successful or not will come down the road, now that there's a gap

there that I'm not there to give permission, or to direct change or to force it whatever way."

Another commented,

"I think I could say with great affirmation, yeah. It's been a lot of cultural change", and, "...that whole change has been transformational for lots of people. And that's the most commented thing amongst the membership of what's happened with Path of Renewal - the liberation to do and to be."

Reflecting on the responses, Charlie stated,

"I find it interesting what Gordon's saying because I'm thinking as he's talking and listening to everybody, and there's almost a sense in which if Path of Renewal hadn't been there, we would have all been trying something anyway. And what Path of Renewal has done is help focus us and give us tools to - and the word permission keeps been used in various contexts - permission to do what we feel that God was calling us to do."

Fiona's response to that was, I think, profound,

"I think the danger would have been to dive down another rabbit hole of a programme, another silver bullet, another thing that fails, whereas this has given us the freedom to concentrate on atmosphere and then gradually cultural change and a recognition that actually there is no perfect church that we are aiming to be. There is no Halcyon Day that we will get back to. There is a journey. There is only constant change. There's only following after God. There is only seeking and building the kingdom and that everything else is actually a false hope."

5.3.4 Will it bring lasting change?

When asked if Path of Renewal was embedded enough in the congregation to continue if they left, there was a mixed response. One minister commented,

"I'm laughing because that's exactly what I did. I've picked up wee bits and pieces via Facebook and the like, which at some stage or another encouraged me that it had embedded to some extent. And I got the feeling that new things were beginning to happen in my absence which actually gives me goosebumps, because I'm happy, because I think it was Liam said that as ministers it's a quite often the case that can be a good thing if once we leave something that just, that it just keeps on going... So why are we so precious about trying to kind of hang onto things for our own ego, anyway, that was a wee bit

of excitement there because I think it did embed to some extent, but I know nothing else other than the wee bits I've picked up."

Something that was reflected in different ways throughout the responses is the difficulty of working as part of a large and unwieldy organisation:

"Having been on that process as well having left just at the end of the third year, I'm not sure. And the reason I'm not sure is, I trust in the people who kind of bought into it and ran with it. My concerns are the suffocating influences of the institution. Because what I've heard since my moving on, has been the imposition of Presbytery leadership, as is our tradition, that's completely coming at things from a completely different direction and suffocating and reversing things that they were doing. So, so much of the good stuff they did was completely undone in a matter of months. What had taken years to build up before Path of Renewal, through Path of Renewal, was undone in months. Yeah. And they are angry. The anger is good, because the anger to me says they'll come through this, and they'll want to go back on that journey. But my disappointment is our institution has undermined them to a degree."

This is incredibly sad and deeply frustrating because it is the lived experience of many of us in the denomination. Another minister commented on that same issue:

And the people, I think, who within our own congregations who got it are on this journey too. They won't want to go back and I think it's as you say, does institution crush them or does the change that is about to happen empower them? And that's fundamentally a big question for the institution.

It is right that there are processes in place so that continuity is provided to a congregation during a vacancy, however, there are times when scant regard is paid to the requirements of the congregation regarding its theology and practice. Sometimes this is due to lack of thought, but more often due to a lack of qualified people to fill the roles on a temporary basis.

Uncertainty and frustration are clear in this comment:

I suppose my prayer is that that's the wrong question. I mean, I suspect if I were to follow a number of theories, the atmosphere has changed, but not the kind of the processes and structures and ways of working, but I'm really hoping - it sounds hopelessly naïve and stupid - But what, I mean, we started our first conference about that broken

plane, remember that and the church has broken do we try and fix it or do we just go and get a new plane? And a part of me thinks that actually the challenge of this time is not about fixing the church. It's about noticing that God is wanting us to do and be different - totally, be totally different than... what's going to come out of the discussion and the fallout of these next few years. I pray it's going to be something that looks so unlike the institution that you're saying is crushing. The church you left that that actually, that's the wrong question. I'm hoping that I will never really leave. I will almost certainly move alongside a sideways, around and about, but I'm hoping that what ends up being the church in [This town] and God's people in [This town] is so very different from the eight congregations and the Boards and the Sessions and the dah, dah, dah... that actually, it's a nonpoint. Now, I have no idea how we get to that. I really don't. But for me Path of Renewal is the only route I've got to start stepping along. I have to trust that somehow God is calling us to be part of his kingdom again.

5.4 What next?

In this chapter I have considered participant responses based on the interview questions. I have shown some of the issues around gathering a local group to take on the work of Path or Renewal; what the expectations of participants was, and if they were met; what groups experienced in meeting together and the content of their meetings; what, if any changes they see in themselves, other group members and the wider congregation; and, the role of the Church of Scotland in the process.

In the next chapter I will set out four key findings which I have identified from the research. I will then look in more detail at how the Path of Renewal process was established, why there were different sets of aims and objectives, and if any of the hopes for the process were met.

I will address whether the Path of Renewal process is simply another church growth model, contrast it with the other models I have used and whether we need a model at all.

Finally, I will address the question of the effectiveness of the process on the understanding, experience and practice of Christian Discipleship.

6 Chapter 6: The Path of Renewal or the Esplanade of Escapism?

In this chapter, I draw together the different threads of previous chapters. I assess: whether the process achieved the goals and expectations set out, and the reasons for success or failure; the merits of the Path of Renewal process compared to other change or discipleship processes, arguing that it has particular distinctive features; and, comment on church membership versus discipleship.

The Saturday after my ordination and induction was the one hundredth anniversary of the local promenade. A day of celebration was planned and thousands of people turned up. It was a beautiful, sunny day and, because it was deemed a success, an annual celebration was born. The promenade was a place where people exercised, dogs were walked, children played and where people went to escape for a few moments. There were so many options to participate in but it was a place of peace and comfort for many people. If you sat long enough you would notice people walking from one end to the other, and back again. It was a place people knew and were comfortable. The Promenade was part of a much longer coastal path and, very occasionally, you would notice someone walking with a bit more purpose and they would not turn around and come back, they kept on going.

That's a picture of many congregations today. They are places of joy and peace for some people; places where life happens; places where the regulars are content and comfortable; and places where the occasional person passes through. There is nothing wrong with that except God's kingdom is much bigger and God's people are meant to move to new places and new things. The bible is full of stories of journey, shipwreck and adventure. We need places to rest and even escape for a while, but somehow that has become the norm, and it needs to change. Could the Path of Renewal process really help people move from the known and secure to experience the new, or was it another option which, having been tried, left them where they had started?

6.1 Path of Renewal: a multiplicity of aims, objectives and goals.

I am now going to consider the Path of Renewal process in more detail and the beginning seems to be a good place to start. As I have previously indicated, the Path of Renewal process in the Church of Scotland can trace roots back to the 2001 Church Without Walls report. The desire to see change in the way the Church of Scotland approached mission and discipleship was carried from that report by the Panel of Review and Reform.

6.1.1 Outcomes

When the Path of Renewal process was formally instituted, the following points identified as outcomes were shared with participants:

1. 'Ministers equipped to lead through transition and in missional churches.
2. Congregations with a missional focus and a team approach to ministry.⁴³
3. The development of new local leadership.
4. The development of a proven approach to transitioning churches from which others will benefit.
5. Although not the primary focus, it is hoped that some of those who become involved as leaders at a local level will subsequently sense a call to Ministry of Word and Sacrament within the national church.' (Appendix 1)

A full-time co-ordinator was appointed, and the process was rolled out to congregations. Early in the process a second set of points was issued, this time identified as goals and objectives (Appendix 2):

- Ensuring those in key leadership roles play the role of enablers and equippers.
- Rooting members in their walk with Christ, deepening faith and commitment.
- Building leaders – discerning those with leadership gifts and helping them to develop both character and expertise for leadership.
- Creating Christian community where all relationships are governed by Kingdom values and where relevant, inspiring worship has a central place.

⁴³ Ebel prepared a report for the Panel on Review and Reform which became the Report of the Panel on Review and Reform to the General Assembly of 2019 and was incorporated into the official report for the General Assembly, known as the 'Blue Book'. The 'Blue Book, edited by Pinkerton, adds the words 'Vibrant, growing' before congregations in Section 3.1.3 and changes it to growing vibrant in Section 3.3.4 (Pinkerton 2019). This is potentially confusing as they could be considered to have different meanings: spirited, lively, energetic congregations that are growing numerically, or helping to plant and establish spirited, lively, energetic congregations. I assume this is an editing issue and it is the first idea that is relevant.

- Equipping members to live for Christ in their families, workplace, communities and the world and to be agents of change, seeking to bring Kingdom values.
- To be active partners with others in community initiatives which are helping to bring positive transformation to lives and communities – recognising God at Work in and through these.
- Equipping members to give a “reason for the hope that is in them” and encouraging members to speak appropriately about their faith.
- Creating opportunities for those interested in exploring faith to do so.

Sam explained the reason for having two sets of outcomes:

So, one of those was produced before the co-ordinator started, and so, and while she was in broad agreement with the outcomes expressed in that, she had slight reservations about some of them. She wouldn't have worded them in that way, probably is all it comes down to, and so later on, when we produced another set of expectations, they seemed - och, it wasn't so much their achievability because we have to have some room to reach. But in just in terms of the language, that we could speak about things that she was more comfortable with.

There is significant difference in the attitude towards leaders between the two lists. The first was focused on ministers as leaders. This has been the default position of the Church of Scotland for at least the last thirty-four years (since I became a member). This minister-centric attitude has permeated every level of the organisation to the detriment of all, so it was not a surprise that the first list would have that focus. The prevailing thinking expected ministers to push learning forward by using the teaching they had received with their group. Sam acknowledges the importance of the process fitting the culture of the Church of Scotland:

I actually think that was vital. I mean, one of the big things was we went against the Canadian advice, to not work with the leaders [ministers], but to work with folk at the next level, if you like. And we recognise in our Scottish context that wouldn't work. We recognise that's wrong but with our context, it wouldn't have worked. We've also in the subsequent years discovered a similar, and I would call a programme, in the Church of England, which is looking for the same kind of cultural renewal but presented much more as a programme. And again, that's not something we could have lifted and brought to Scotland. We are talking to the folks down there. We are learning from their process, but there is something in the Scottish psyche that means that we have to match.

In her report on The Path of Renewal process, Ebel was clear that the focus on missional churches was expected to result in congregations which displayed three 'key characteristics':

1. 'Vibrant, attractive worshipping communities
2. Who are forming people in faith and,
3. Connected with their wider communities.

In terms of outcome these are designed to lead to:

1. A growth in numbers
2. A deepening commitment to Christ and,
3. A growing impact on the community.' (Ebel 2019)

Although these key characteristics and outcomes appeared in the final report prepared and submitted by Ebel, they did not appear in the original information sent to congregations.

I want to take each point in all three lists in turn and consider whether or not they have been achieved. These first five points formed the basis of a report to the 2019 General Assembly by the Panel on Review and Reform (Pinkerton 2019, Section 16) and I will reflect on differences and similarities between my findings and the report. From Appendix 1:

6.1.1.1 Ministers equipped to lead through transition and in missional churches.

I suggest this has been partially fulfilled. All of the ministers who completed the three-year process were given training and resources which would enable them to lead a congregation through a process of change. In her report Ebel states:

'Almost everyone said that being part of Path of Renewal had enhanced, supplemented or changed their ministry. This was a combination of being introduced to new resources and being asked questions that helped the participants to express themselves

differently - and perhaps - more effectively to their congregations. However, respondents also said that it would be difficult to ascribe all of their progress directly to Path of Renewal as their theological ethos was to be missional anyway' (Ebel 2019, 8).

Leading in a truly missional church requires an altogether different approach and none of the participants suggested that their congregations had become missional. Many suggested that there was an increase in missional activities and that a portion of the congregation had been involved in new activities. Personally, I am not convinced that I would be able to lead a congregation that is only missional. I would like to, and I'm excited by the prospect, but I'm not sure the process equipped me to do so, and my experience is limited. I believe that a congregation cannot in the long term be only attractational or only missional, despite having a particular focus, there has to be an element of both.

The Report highlighted the sense of discomfort people felt in the move "from 'coming to church' to 'being the church'" (Pinkerton 2019, 277 (16:3.3.1)) and that the two most important elements '*of successful renewal are trust in the minister and changing mindset from inward to outward looking*' (Pinkerton 2019, 278 (3.3.2)). What is not addressed is the extent to which this has been achieved. There are two stories from participating congregations which are about congregations engaging in new partnerships and it is perhaps telling that the word 'ministers' has been removed from the outcome. The two stories given do not mention ministers.

6.1.1.2 Congregations with a missional focus and a team approach to ministry.

Again, I think this is partly fulfilled. I have no evidence from the participants that a whole congregation has a missional focus or that every member has accepted a team approach. Some congregations have been able to make progress in both areas, developing missional activities and/or building a team.

As noted earlier, the report adds the words 'growing vibrant' at the start but there is no indication why they are added or what they mean (Pinkerton 2019, 278 (3.3.4)). For me, the report makes the error that has resulted in years of decline when it states, 'Sharing faith leads to discipleship which leads (hopefully) to people returning to church or coming to church' (Pinkerton 2019,

278 (3.3.5)). It's not that I fundamentally disagree, but the focus is on getting people to church: the attractational model. Conversely, is the implication that church decline is the result of lack of discipleship due to a lack of sharing faith? For me, sharing faith does not automatically lead to discipleship although sharing faith is part of discipleship.

The report contains two tables titled Taking Stock which show changes identified by ministers between 2016 and 2018. These suggest that there were positive changes for Path of Renewal Groups and some congregations during that time.

6.1.1.3 The development of new local leadership.

I would argue that this has been fulfilled, at least in some measure, for all of the participating congregations⁴⁴. Every participant could identify some changes, with people who had not been involved before taking on new responsibilities. I am not arguing that every congregation now has more individuals who will lead worship or be more vocal at Kirk Session meetings. It's not necessarily a 'from the front' kind of leadership but every congregation could identify positive changes in one or more members and those people, by their example, become leaders. For some congregations that subtle change is all they can point to. For others it is much more obvious. Ministers talked of their group 'being liberated to develop their ministry', 'liberated to try new things', 'gaining confidence to share ideas'. That was my personal experience of the process. As I stated earlier, none of my group would have identified as 'leaders' although most were very involved in the life of the church but at the end of the three-year process all of them had tried new things and some had taken on leadership of specific projects and ideas.

The report talks about how groups were formed and states there has been 'slow progress' while identifying two congregations that were able to continue the process without a minister (Pinkerton 2019, 270).

⁴⁴ For all participating congregations in the full pilot process. It was not achieved in all Pilot Lite or Pilot Team congregations.

6.1.1.4 The development of a proven approach to transitioning churches from which others will benefit.

The answer here depends on the understanding of ‘proven approach’. If the Panel meant an approach that is easily replicable and will always produce the same result i.e. transformation and growing congregations, then I believe the answer is this has not been achieved. Ebel commented,

‘There has been an unintended consequence during this first phase of Path of Renewal. As ministers have reflected on where they are in terms of life, career and what God is telling them, six ministers have changed their charge, two have demitted and one has retired. While some admitted that they had been thinking about this anyway, participating in PoR has given them the push to make these changes’ (Ebel 2019, 8).

Nine of twenty-four ministers on the Pilot Process were involved in significant changes in their own lives during this process⁴⁵ and others in the Pilot Lite and Pilot Team also moved away or stopped the process. Sam suggested from experience that the issue

‘is that it was the people that didn’t fully engage, because I’m thinking of [local congregation]. They were never really on board, even from the outset. Then a couple of ministers moved parishes and to me that’s the whole risk that you take when you encourage people in discernment - cause what they might discern is that they’re in the wrong place. I’m not saying there wasn’t anything in Path or Renewal which might have made folk want to bail out, what I’m saying is that people didn’t come and feed that back. But what I observed, and there may well have been and they’ve just not told me, what I observed is that people who didn’t really engage with it soon tired of it.’

For me, the main point of the process was that each congregation was to find its own way to make the required changes. Some were already changing, so their path would be in one direction. Another had not made significant changes, so they would take a different route. Location, history, buildings, finance and people all play into the process and affect the outcome. The teaching input was vital and in that respect there is huge benefit in developing an approach that empowers people (not necessarily ministers) to think about and promote change; that provides appropriate teaching input; that provides space for reflection; and

⁴⁵ As far as I am aware there has been no work carried out with this or subsequent groups.

that provides support through learning communities. However, making this process a ‘one size fits all’ would, in my opinion, be a retrograde step and that is the danger of trying to ‘package’ a process like this to be brought out when required. If the ‘proven approach’ is simply that involvement in the Path of Renewal process will bring beneficial change in the life of a congregation I would argue that is true.

In the Report this becomes ‘Creating a movement, not a programme’ and ignores any comment on developing a proven approach (Pinkerton 2019, 280 (3.3.13)). The report indicates that Path of Renewal has ‘brought mission-minded people together, for a sustained length of time’ and that ‘ministers... found new energy and purpose after attending [Path of Renewal] conferences’. All of the participating ministers agreed with that sentiment, but the report is quite different from the original and it is not clear why this change has been made. Building a proven approach is very different from creating a movement.

6.1.1.5 Although not the primary focus, it is hoped that some of those who become involved as leaders at a local level will subsequently sense a call to Ministry of Word and Sacrament within the national church.

In 2019 Ebel reported,

This was an ambitious aspiration for Tranche 1 borne out of the climate of declining numbers applying for Ministry of Word and Sacrament. However, one person, through the process of discernment in PoR, has taken up an MDS role and another PoR congregation member has applied to be an OLM. (Anecdotally small numbers of new members have been reported along with slightly bigger numbers of adherents/regular worshippers. Sometimes God’s call takes time to be heard.) (Ebel 2019)

In May 2022 I sent a simple form requiring yes or no answers (Appendix 6) to candidates in training for all types of ministry within the Church of Scotland asking three questions:

1. Do you know what the Path of Renewal process is?
2. Before becoming a candidate was your congregation involved in the Path of Renewal process?
3. Did involvement in the Path of Renewal process influence your call to ministry?

Thirty-two responded. For question one, 43.75% stated they knew what Path of Renewal was but 56.25% did not know what it was. For question 2, only one person had been in a congregation that was involved in Path of Renewal. For Question 3, that same person indicated that involvement in the process influenced their call to ministry. This indicates that despite having now had three tranches, the Path of Renewal process is still not well known in the wider Church despite being promoted among congregations (Appendix 1), articles in the Church magazine Life and Work and on the church website, and reports to the General Assembly.⁴⁶ The results also indicate that people are still being called to ministry in other ways.

The Report makes this, ‘Calling people to Ministry of Word and Sacrament’ (Pinkerton 2019, 280 (3.3.14)) and acknowledges the ambition of the outcome. Two people connected with the process had applied for ministry roles while at the time of writing six participant ministers had changed charge, two had demitted and one retired.

6.1.2 Goals and Objectives

The second set of goals and objectives that were issued have a different emphasis. These are more about individuals and their personal growth and faith and they are more closely linked.

6.1.2.1 Ensuring those in key leadership roles play the role of enablers and equippers.

Because of the focus on ministers, it was essential that the participants passed on what was being taught. The ministers concerned recognised this as their role although some also struggled to find appropriate ways to do this. Some Path of Renewal groups had members who were also able and willing to take on some

⁴⁶ Life and Work: October 2015 <https://www.lifeandwork.org/news/news/post/493-new-project-to-forge-new-paths-for-churches> and May 2021 <https://www.lifeandwork.org/news/news/post/1482-church-warned-on-ministry-numbers>

Church of Scotland website: <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/archive/2018/articles/path-of-renewal-helps-52-congregations-explore-new-approaches-to-mission> and <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/2022/articles/talking-ministry-step-forwards-and-look-for-gods-enabling-power>

Reports: Panel on Review and Reform 2016 and 2017.

aspects of the role. This was a development of the idea of increasing participation and including new local leadership. Where this happened it was deemed to be helpful and beneficial, and it was vital in those congregations where the minister moved to a new charge during the process. Work done in this area prior to the minister moving enabled the group members and, to a lesser extent, the wider congregation to continue with the process. This is tied into the later role of building leaders.

6.1.2.2 Rooting members in their walk with Christ, deepening faith and commitment.

I believe this was achieved. All of the participants agreed that their faith had grown, and most had become more involved, or had seen others become more involved, in the life of the congregation. It is possible for someone to be very active in the life of a congregation without themselves having faith, but it appears that this process encouraged and enhanced faith which, in turn, resulted in increased commitment and activity. Participants spoke of the benefit of activities like ‘dwelling in the Word’⁴⁷ in deepening their faith.

6.1.2.3 Building leaders – discerning those with leadership gifts and helping them to develop both character and expertise for leadership.

This is clearly linked with deepening faith and commitment and enabling and equipping for leadership. I have previously indicated some of the difficulties participants experienced in identifying and recruiting group members. Some looked for existing leaders and tried to recruit them while others identified people with the potential for leadership and recruited them. Participating ministers used a variety of ways of fulfilling this outcome. Some met individuals and talked through materials from conference sessions; some met more regularly as a group and used bible studies or books to share learning together; some met with their group and focussed on spiritual disciplines. None of the participants talked about using specific leadership development or training programmes with their group but most speak of group members, and others in the congregation, taking on new leadership roles. There was nothing in the suggested reading list

⁴⁷ See explanation on pages 28/29.

(Appendix 7) given to the ministers that dealt specifically with leadership development.

6.1.2.4 Creating Christian community where all relationships are governed by Kingdom values and where relevant, inspiring worship has a central place.

This is an amazing vision to have and, I would argue, something to strive for, however, it has not been achieved. There are significant questions that need to be answered by any group or individual trying to achieve this goal. The first, and I think most important, is, “What are Kingdom values?” This was never properly defined, and it is not clear if it is different to ‘Christian values’. In a denomination that sometimes calls itself a ‘broad church’ it is understandable that these values were left a bit vague as it leaves interpretation open to the theological understanding of the participant. Again, there was nothing in the reading list (Appendix 7) to aid understanding. Breen has a chapter in a book not on the list, ‘Leading Kingdom Movements’ (Breen 2013, 3-23) and I found it helpful. He talks about Kingdom movements rather than Kingdom values:

Ultimately, a Kingdom movement is a community that functions as a portal to the new world that God wants for all his children. Put another way, a Kingdom movement is a community of disciples who passionately seek the expansion of God’s reign here on earth through the reproduction of disciples, seeking the transformation of the places they inhabit (Breen 2013, 22).

In chapter 13, Breen uses an equilateral triangle to help explain the three things he says are required to bring a kingdom movement to reality and he bases this on his understanding of the early church. Each point of the triangle is labelled UP, OUT or IN. UP equates to Passionate Spirituality ‘*expressed in unbridled praise and worship, prayer, commitment to the teaching and obeying of the word, and lives oriented around fasting, feasting and the breaking of bread.*’ IN is about Radical Community where people are encouraged to be sacrificial ‘*and share life to levels that we would call extreme.... In order to be a family on mission together*’. OUT is Missional Zeal and Breen argues that for the early church mission was different in different places: Jerusalem saw rapid growth because of their radical lifestyle, Antioch had many missionaries while Ephesus responded by sending out church planters. This suggests that each congregation or missional community needs to find its own expression of mission.

Is there any Christian community (in congregational terms) where all relationships are governed by Kingdom values?⁴⁸ The Church of Scotland has ongoing conversations around unions of congregations, and these are more likely to be governed by concerns over personal and congregational loss than thoughts of what might build ‘the Kingdom’. I do not say that to be critical but to highlight the slightly sweeping nature of the original statement. Holding to ‘Kingdom values’ appears to be a laudable ambition but without a clear definition it simply becomes a nice sentiment.

Lastly, the comment does not address what “relevant, inspiring worship” is. Relevant to whom? Inspiring in what way? Practically, most ministers can tell stories of the problems associated with music in congregations. Firstly, it has become commonplace to associate music with worship, but worship is much more than singing a hymn or song, or even a number of songs together. Secondly, in the same service there will be people who like a particular hymn and those who don’t like it. One may be inspired and the other disheartened. For me, this is one of the main problems of trying to change an existing congregation. People attend because they have found a style, rhythm or order that they like and can associate with, so changing those things is disruptive. Acknowledging a need to try something different⁴⁹ is much easier than agreeing and implementing ‘something different’.

I do not believe this was achieved. In fact, I do not think it is achievable.

6.1.2.5 Equipping members to live for Christ in their families, workplace, communities and the world and to be agents of change, seeking to bring Kingdom values.

I believe this is another vague, poorly defined outcome but, as it stands, it is partly fulfilled. Again, there is no definition of kingdom values, nor of the phrase ‘seeking to bring Kingdom values’. To whom and for what purpose would we bring ‘Kingdom values’? What are ‘Kingdom values’? I understand the statement to imply that Christian principles are applied to every scenario and situation in

⁴⁸ Nationally the Church of Scotland has been engaged in a Presbytery Planning Process in 2021-2022 which has included the significant loss of ministry posts and buildings. In my experience not much of that process has been governed by Kingdom values.

⁴⁹ This is what is expected of the Path of Renewal process.

‘families, workplace, communities and the world’.⁵⁰ Participants agreed that they had received teaching and opportunities to participate that enabled them to be more Christ-centred, but this was much more limited in the wider congregation.

6.1.2.6 To be active partners with others in community initiatives which are helping to bring positive transformation to lives and communities – recognising God at work in and through these.

Approximately one third of participants indicated that their congregation or group had become involved in community initiatives however, only two had engaged ‘with others’ to do so. It may be that this is due to congregations having poor or limited links with others in their communities, a lack of ideas for engagement or that they simply did not ‘feel ready’ to engage. This outcome cannot be said to have been fulfilled.

6.1.2.7 Equipping members to give a “reason for the hope that is in them” and encouraging members to speak appropriately about their faith.

This is another partly fulfilled objective. Five of eighteen participants spoke of being more confident about their faith and being less hesitant in speaking about what they believe. However, assuming ‘members’ refers to people in the congregation, there was no evidence to suggest this had been fulfilled.

6.1.2.8 Creating opportunities for those interested in exploring faith to do so.

This is another vague objective. Should it include anyone interested in exploring faith, including participants and church members, or is it thinking of people outside the church? It makes more sense that it was meant for those outside the church when the focus was on being missional, but as the focus shifted to discipleship participants seem to have concentrated more on the congregation. Some participants spoke of developing congregational bible studies or doing an Alpha course which means this is another part fulfilled objective.

⁵⁰ A detailed reflection on the theology of the kingdom of God is beyond the scope of this work.

6.1.3 Three Key Characteristics

The three ‘Key characteristics’ of missional churches recorded by Ebel were developed by the leaders of the process as it progressed⁵¹ and were included in the Report of the Panel on Review and Reform to the General Assembly in 2019 (Pinkerton 2019)

- ‘Vibrant, attractive worshipping communities
- Who are forming people in faith and,
- Connected with their wider communities.

In terms of outcome these are designed to lead to:

- A growth in numbers
- A deepening commitment to Christ and,
- A growing impact on the community.’ (Ebel 2019)

As I read and understand these, I would argue that they should be the marks of every congregation, not just missional ones. It is strange that in identifying markers of missional churches the word attractive should be used. If, as has been suggested, the idea of Path of Renewal was to move from being attractional this is an unusual choice of words. However, my suspicion is that by the time this was written the process had become more focussed on discipleship and less firmly on being missional. To encourage people outwith the congregation to examine faith there needs to be something that entices them to participate, something ‘attractive’. The question of definitions arises again and there is no clear understanding of what is meant by ‘vibrant’, ‘attractive’ or even ‘worshipping communities’. I believe that most congregations would say they meet these key characteristics, but the reality would not support that assertion. For congregations on the Path of Renewal process growth has been limited to a very few congregations but for the wider church, there has been no growth in numbers, either in people attending or in membership. There has been a deepening commitment in participants and some congregations, but it has

⁵¹ The Convenor of the Panel on Review and Reform, Rev Jenny Adams, highlighted this in her speech to the General Assembly in May 2019 - https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0009/57537/Panel_on_Review_and_Reform_speech_-_General_Assembly_2019.pdf (Accessed 29 December 2022)

been limited and there has been even less impact on the different communities represented.

6.2 Path of Renewal: other issues around the process

The report to the General Assembly prepared by Ebel (Ebel 2019) seems to me to have minimised the difficulties and lack of progress and over-emphasised small successes. I suspect that was a deliberate reflection of the desire, by all concerned, to secure future support and funding for the process. This is simply a recognition that reports are often written for a purpose and with good reason. There clearly were successes and there was growth among the participants and their congregations, but it takes a long time to change the culture of an organisation or group. When your funding and support are coming from an organisation in crisis, looking for ways to grow, preferably quickly, you have to emphasise whatever successes there have been. Representing the Panel on Review and Reform, Sam commented about the report:

I thought it was a lot of words to say that two years on, which is what it was, there are green shoots here. In a nutshell, that's what it is. There are green shoots here. It's going to take another five years to see if those actually come to anything. So, yeah, there were encouragements in it. We got a few, but very few stories, out through it but it was enough to convince the funding to continue.

One significant factor that I have not yet mentioned is that once the process was underway the outcomes, goals and objectives were not really mentioned. They were talked about when the report for the General Assembly was being prepared but otherwise they were let slide. With hindsight it would have been beneficial to have discussed progress against them every six months or so. Ebel does not mention this in her report. In fact, in working through the original desired outcomes she highlights successes in each area, however, the original outcome four, "The development of a proven approach to transitioning churches from which others will benefit", has been changed to, "Creating a movement, not a programme" (Ebel 2019, 11). It is not clear why that change was made but I

assume it was because the original outcome was not achievable. As previously stated, I find it vague and not compatible with the Path of Renewal process. 'Creating a movement, not a programme' became the unofficial strap line for the process during tranche 1 highlighting the need for individual congregations to find their own way forward and to make changes at a speed that was right for them.

Ebel speaks of the mentoring process in Path of Renewal (Ebel 2019, 17-19). This was, for me, a vital component of the process. In the months there was no conference we either met as a small group (usually six people plus the mentor) or a one-on-one with the mentor. This provided an opportunity to reflect on recent conference material and also to build deeper relationships. These times provided support and encouragement in an environment of mutual respect and trust. I suspect that was made easier because of the skill and experience of the mentor.

I was one of the twelve who went on to mentor in tranche 2 of the process. In my opinion, there had not been the same emphasis during preparation of the second tranche on needing to give something up in order to give one day a week to the process. It was quite clear that some of the participants had simply added Path of Renewal to their existing workload and there seemed to be less commitment to the process overall.

Tranche 2 started during the third year of tranche 1 and that raised some significant issues for both groups. Tranche 1 suffered because the mentors and staff were more focussed on tranche 2 being set up and started. Ideally there should have been different mentors organising and leading that second tranche. The practical effect was that year three of the process seemed to stall and although there was still forward movement, it seemed to slow. In the September of year three (2018), the first tranche participants had their final conference together and some of that time was shared with tranche 2 participants. Tranche 1 participants expressed a strong desire to continue to meet and agreed to provide an annual conference, one day conferences and learning communities. None of this happened. Path of Renewal staff and mentors were too busy with that to take on the extra administration and responsibility. Ministers went back to their parishes with all that entails. It is not a criticism, it is the reality of life

in ministry. There are always other things to do and unless someone has the specific responsibility to arrange a conference or training it is unlikely to happen. Of course, the pandemic happened and that had a significant impact on what could be done, especially for tranche 3. As a member of the Panel on Review and Reform Sam commented:

I think there was a good momentum for the first two years and we lost focus in the third year. Again, we've learned loads from that which is going to affect the people we're working with now. But what has been effective, I wondered if we should have waited until the three years had finished and then started a new tranche, if that was part of the diversion, but it seemed like the momentum would have been lost. What has really helped is the folk from that first tranche who are mentoring the second tranche. Those are the folk that are still meeting together, are still involved, are still learning from what we're teaching the new lot. That's been invaluable.

As well as that, Graham Duffin stopped being a mentor at the end of 2018. Graham had been the instigator of the process and was one of the main driving forces behind it. He was actively involved in the planning and preparation of conferences and, on hindsight, this was a significant loss for the process. None of the other mentors were able to offer the same level of commitment so much of the burden then fell on Rev Liz Crumlish. She was the full-time Path of Renewal co-ordinator and I suspect that she suffered from the same attitude that ministers struggle with - 'you are paid to do this so get on with it'. Planning conferences and leading most sessions at those conferences, along with regular mentoring and preparing for another Tranche is, I think, too much for one person.

What excited me in the first instance about the Path of Renewal process was that it was able to be adapted to each congregation. Purpose Driven is a programme that needs to be followed closely, but if it is, success is 'guaranteed' (Warren 1995, 49-50). All these years later I'm not convinced that Warren would write with the same guarantee. The programme is labour intensive and in my experience there were not enough people in the congregation to keep it going. Warren is concerned with how the church relates to and reaches out to the local

community. In a denomination that is struggling with years of decline we need to ask ourselves if we are, in fact, the greatest hindrance to effectively communicating the gospel. Why are people not coming to church? Why would they? Why would someone choose to come to a cold, draughty building to sing hymns with words that don't make sense today, perhaps accompanying a 'choir' that used to be able to keep the tune? Why would they choose to listen to someone talking at them but not addressing any of the questions they have? Why would they endure the cheapest Fairtrade coffee and a plain biscuit in a damp and mouldy hall when they can go along the road and get a decent cup? If a congregation has had no people coming to faith for years, or if the only new people who come are those that have moved to the area and are looking for a church, but they don't stay, or if there is nobody under fifty years old regularly attending then it's time to ask some serious questions.

Even now I can picture colleagues and friends angrily saying, "My church is not like that!" And many are not, but too many still are. Too many are insular and concerned only with surviving, decrying the community for not coming on Sunday but never really stopping to ask why? And certainly never thinking to ask the community why? Warren's answer is to find out what people want and give it to them. As previously stated, Warren is aware that people call that dumbing down but he is adamant that the message should never change, only the packaging. Path of Renewal encouraged congregations to engage with their communities and to try and establish close links. Where this works it can be very positive and help a congregation work out what their community needs and how those needs can be addressed. That does not mean instantly changing everything you do, that would chase away many of the people you already had, but it should provoke questions. For me, Purpose Driven is for a different age and not ideally suited to Scottish church life today.

What attracted me to Schwarz's Natural Church Development was that it was based on research and the quality characteristics made sense to me. While it shares the problematic issue of adhering to set rules with Purpose Driven thinking, it also has a degree of flexibility Purpose Driven does not have. The fact that the leadership works together to identify the areas where there is 'lack of health' seems positive to me. The problem is that like Path of Renewal it is

focussed on leaders. They may not be the best people to honestly answer questions that can affect their role. In the congregations I was involved with in this process it was decided that they could include other members (both were quite small in membership). Interestingly, one Kirk Session got the results of the survey and concluded that it was not correct. They assumed people had misunderstood, or that something had gone wrong with the analysis because the outcome was unexpected and suggested that what they thought was a strong area turned out to be one of their weakest. They decided not to proceed because they could not, or would not, believe the results. The other congregation agreed with their result but was unable to find a way forward in addressing the issue. They had already identified a weakness in that area and the NCD process confirmed it. I think both situations would have benefitted from some input about Bridges transformation processes and issues associated from being in the neutral zone (Bridges 2009, 3-15). The problem for congregations is that they are engaging in the process because they want to grow, but they are anxious about the changes that would be required to make that happen. That attitude is shared by many of the people involved in Path of Renewal. Many participants spoke about the uncertainty they faced in the early days and that they did not always reach a resolution of the problems they had identified that were preventing growth and change. None of these processes will work unless there is a core group of people who will work together to promote and work toward changes. Had those two congregations decided that Schwarz's process was right and pushed on, it could have allowed them to make the changes they needed to make to develop healthier congregations. Instead, they reverted to what they knew and struggled on, one continuing to fail to deal with an issue they had already identified and not taken the hard decisions that were necessary, the other ignoring the issue that was identified in the research and trying to make changes elsewhere. The first alienated some of the very people who were willing to lead change and the second, lost some of those who knew what the real issue was and realised it would not be dealt with.

Alpha is quite different to the previous two processes in that it is not a church change tool. It is a tool that has been used across the world as both an evangelistic course, introducing people to aspects of the Christian faith, and perhaps inadvertently, a tool for discipleship. It offers a 'refresher' for some

believers, perhaps presenting aspects of theology or ecclesiology with which they are unfamiliar. My experience is that Christians who do the course often find something in the teaching they did not know, and that the challenge of engaging others in conversation about belief and faith makes them think about what they actually believe. I have already indicated that I run an Alpha course each year and have done for many years. It makes me think and I find it stimulating. It is not Path of Renewal. It will not change church structures, but people are changed as they do it and that can, in turn, bring unexpected changes to a congregation. Some attend and find they still don't believe, others come to believe for the first time and still others find their faith renewed and commitment deepened.

For me, the fact the people respond to the message of Christianity at all is amazing, but that people choose to respond and allow their lives to be transformed as they seek, with God's help, to follow, or become like Jesus is remarkable. I have spoken about the difference between membership and discipleship already, but it needs further consideration. Becoming a member of the Church of Scotland is possible at any stage in life and usually requires a person to have been baptised, or to be baptised at the service when they become a member⁵². Admission is through public confession of faith during which the person is asked to confirm belief in God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Having done so they are then asked to promise: to meet for worship with fellow Christians regularly; to be faithful in reading the bible and in prayer; to give of their time, talent and money to the church; and to profess publicly loyalty to Jesus, to serve him every day and to walk in his ways 'all the days of your life' (Blackadder 1996, 109-118). I suggest that if people were actually doing these things it would look very much like discipleship, and the church might not be in the state it finds itself at the moment. The truth is that for a variety of reasons most of us find keeping these promises difficult. I know people who became members decades ago when 'going to church' was still thought to be a good thing to do but they had no intention of ever being fully involved. Every congregation has people for whom faith and church is a Sunday only activity, yet they enjoy the traditions and rhythms of the liturgy and are content

⁵² It is possible to join if you have been a member of another denomination. In this case the Kirk Session can accept your transfer into the Church of Scotland.

with that. Every congregation has more official members than attend regularly, some cannot attend due to health or age issues, others simply have no interest but their name still exists on a roll as a member.

Congregations also have people who do attend regularly but see no need to 'join' the church and many are involved in the life of the church. In my previous congregation there was a couple who attended every Sunday, were involved in the prayer meetings and bible study and helped with pastoral care. They had done so for over thirty years but never officially joined the church. People like that are not recorded in church statistics and yet they often play a vital role in congregational life. Clearly then it is possible to be a member of the church but not be a disciple and it is possible to be a disciple without being a member of the church. As a minister, it is my goal to make disciples and, although my preference is that they would become members of the church, that is a secondary consideration for me.

In this chapter I have argued that the outcomes, goals and objectives issued to participants in Path of Renewal were confusing, vague and ill-defined. They were written for the purpose of securing funding to allow the process to exist, and to that extent they were successful. Some were achieved fully but most were only partly achieved. I believe one could not be achieved as it goes against the principles of Path of Renewal. I have discussed how my experience of Path of Renewal has differed from my experience of Purpose Driven Church, Natural Church Development and the Alpha Course.

7 Chapter 7 – What Next for Path of Renewal

In this chapter I will summarise the outcomes of my research using four key findings which emerged from critical analysis of the interviews and reflection on my experience of and involvement in the programme. I then review my findings and propose that we urgently need to reclaim the word and practice of discipleship, and set out my conclusions and suggestions for a way forward for Path of Renewal as a tool for congregational change and promoting discipleship.

7.1 Key findings from the research

I want to highlight four key findings which emerged from the interviews.

7.1.1 Endorsement by the Church of Scotland was vital.

Key finding 1: Official endorsement by the General Assembly or a central committee of the church is vital to the success of a project.

When asked to consider the importance of the process being offered by the Church of Scotland, all of the ministers and six of nine elders said that it was of little or no importance to them personally, but it was very important for the congregation. They talked of it having status and authority, with Debbie summarising the comments:

“I think for the general congregation that this may be important that it was authorised by the Church of Scotland. Because they are Church of Scotland members, you know. I think in that kind of Presbyterian background it's important that things aren't seen as... You know people don't like that in a kind of traditional church, things that are just fly-by-night, or off the wall, or whatever. So, I think for them it was probably important that it was authorised. For the wee group that got involved it was probably less important.”

Christine was clear that being an ‘official’ process was important:

“It gives it, it gives it some sort of status if you like. I think you're right. A lot of the ethos was how we were thinking and planning and working anyway, but it just gives it that kind of rubber stamp, you know. If you go to Session or the congregation to suggest things I think it's quite good to have a hook for it, you know, an official hook. It wouldn't necessarily have stopped us, but I think it does make it easier.”

The ministers discussed permission giving, support, resources and cultural connectivity. One stated,

“Important and not. Let me unpack that a wee bit. Not in the sense that this could potentially work with any denomination but given the current circumstances of our own denomination I'm going to use that term permission giving again. It gave us permission to do our job and was supportive as well.”

Another commented,

“I think the important part of the institutional endorsement, for want of a better phrase, is the fact that we have quicker, more direct access to tools and resources and we weren't all spending time trying to find something to speak into what we were trying to explore.”

Regarding the process potentially being offered by another provider, most agreed that their congregations would not have ‘bought into’ it. This confirmed the concern of the committee voiced by Sam:

“I actually think that was vital. I mean, one of the big things was we went against the Canadian advice, to not work with the leaders, but to work with folk at the next level, if you like. And we recognise in our Scottish context that wouldn't work. We recognise that's wrong but with our context, it wouldn't have worked. We've also in the subsequent years, discovered a similar and I would call a programme in the Church of England, which is looking for the same kind of cultural renewal but presented much more as a programme. And again, that's not something we could have lifted and brought to Scotland.”

I believe this was one of the most significant decisions made by the committee as they prepared the process. All participants suggested that Church of Scotland members, on the whole, are very traditional and quite conservative. Harold also used the phrase ‘*institutional in outlook*’, and Brian expressed concern that ‘*some of the traditionalists will say it's not the Church of Scotland*’. The fact that care was taken to centre the process within the auspices of the church overcame that fear.

I agree that the decision to ensure that the Path of Renewal process had a clear connection to the main Church structures⁵³ was a very significant one. I think it is likely that the process would have floundered without it. Other organisations are offering similar courses⁵⁴ but participants clearly believed that members of their congregations would not have engaged with them. That was also my experience. I know I used the “It’s for Path of Renewal” line quite regularly to introduce something new, and I was seldom questioned further.

It seems clear to me that any future processes should have the same level of official endorsement to enable them to connect with congregations.

7.1.2 More in, more out.

Key finding 2: The impact of the process was greater for those participants who were most committed to it.

In my experience, the more you put into something, the more you get out. It just seems obvious to me, if a bit simplistic. I was concerned that I might read my belief into the research, particularly as early interviews seemed to confirm it. I was reassured that the research confirmed it.

Sam indicated that the request to make time for the process was vital. There was significant input to suggest that the process should only be attempted if the minister and group members, were willing to give something up, even something they enjoyed and was working well. The idea was that none of the participants would take on the Path of Renewal process in addition to what they were already doing. Clearly, some of those involved were willing to sacrifice that commitment, either to get the specific people they wanted in their group or

⁵³ In Church life you hear people talking about 121 – meaning 121 George Street, Edinburgh. This is where the central offices of the Church of Scotland are. Members often equate 121 with being a decision-making body but decisions are made at the annual General Assembly. Committees are given permission to carry out specific tasks but correspondence about those tasks is likely to come via someone at the Church offices, hence the link.

⁵⁴ CAIRN and Cinnamon Network are two I have experience of.

because there was nobody else to participate. However, those were also the groups that did not work so well.

There was significant variation in the frequency and content of the meetings. Three groups met occasionally, two met monthly and three fortnightly. Two groups never managed to have all of the participants together at the same time. Ministers reported that time commitment was a significant factor in establishing the groups with one commenting, *“What we discovered was that virtually everyone said, that’s far too frequently [monthly meeting], we couldn’t possibly give up that amount of time.”* Another stated, *“They were busy folk with busy lives and other commitments. And it wasn’t till conversation with our friend at the end [Grace] here that the penny dropped, and I started to meet them one to one and the idea of us being a group fell by the wayside.”* Two of those ministers who ended up meeting individuals would not have called themselves disciples, but I believe they were discipling those individuals in leading that way.

Every group included material covered at Path of Renewal conferences, books recommended by participants or other independently sourced resources as part of the learning experience. The elders group all speak of mixed results from group interactions. The groups that met regularly had more of a pattern of bible reading, prayer and sharing other learning, whereas those meeting individuals were more focussed on ‘doing’ and planning what to do. Two elders reflected that their minister had tried to include people who were on the fringes of church life, but neither group worked well. Five of the groups reduced in size throughout the course of the process.

Those ministers and groups who met most regularly and had varied content were the ones that reported the biggest benefits. Gordon acknowledged some growth in his group but stated:

I think it liberated one or two in the group to exercise their ministry, their giftedness more openly and recognise it more openly, but the main part of the group was really unaffected.

Similarly, Fraser had seen little growth:

...sometimes it's hard to see it because I've journeyed with them, but it just seems that there's been little or wee changes.

These were groups that met less frequently, in fact, Fraser never managed to get his group together and met them individually. On the other hand, Charlie was excited by his group, even though he had moved to another congregation:

One of the things that excited me before I was leaving, my group of seven that we spoke about actually spawned another small group, which was almost textbook in a sense. And that was really encouraging, and it excited me because it was an indication that the hope that we had was actually taking place in reality.

I think this idea is not just true of individuals or small groups. I welcome the support Path of Renewal received from the Mission and Discipleship Council and the Panel on Review and Reform, however, there are questions to be asked about their commitment to the process: Lack of clear aims and objectives, no consultation with academic providers even about measuring effectiveness, not funding the process for at least the minimum period of the first three years of the first tranche.

Since the pandemic, the Path of Renewal process has been ignored. There is no funding or support, committee members have changed, and there are new priorities, but if lessons are not learned the same thing will happen with future projects. Perhaps this is a case of not having put in quite enough effort to get the desired results out.

My research shows that the groups that met most frequently and had the most varied programme got more out of the process than those who met less frequently.

7.1.3 We have never done it like this before.

Key finding 3: Being ‘given permission’ to take time to pray, plan and reflect around a shared goal while holding each other accountable, developed trust and encouraged a less competitive, more pastoral experience for participating ministers.

All participants agreed that Path of Renewal had been a worthwhile process to be involved in and that one of the main benefits was, as Gordon suggested,

“...a sense of more collegiate endeavour... It was very much a corporate engagement with concepts and ideas. And that mutuality, I think made it quite different from stuff we’ve experienced before and made it far more hopeful.”

Liam agreed:

“It wasn’t divided along theological lines and was you know, there wasn’t those divisions that I’ve experienced and other programmes and fraternals, but this was about engaging with people who had similar passions, and were dealing with it in all sorts of different contexts from where I am. And that made it really interesting because you were hearing different concepts, different ideas, different problems and where different people were. But that support was always there from everyone.”

In my experience, when ministers get together, there can be a sense of competitiveness among factions and tribal groups. There was none of that among the Path of Renewal ministers despite theological differences. Conferences were, on the whole, times of encouragement and refreshing, time away from the rigours of parish life with time to reflect on teaching and reading. There was a high degree of trust established between individuals and in the larger groups, which resulted in a depth of sharing that I had rarely experienced.

There was a sense of having a shared purpose even though we often did different things in our local groups. The elders were similarly impressed, with Eric stating:

I’d be really disappointed if it stops. If it stops, then the whole point of it has failed.

The question of continuity was raised concerning whether ministers who had been involved but changed congregation during, or just after completion of, the

process would continue to use the Path of Renewal concepts even if not the name, one stated:

Certainly, the congregation I'm in now though it doesn't have the label Path of Renewal, it's infusing everything I'm doing with them. Yeah, because it's changed me. And I can't go back to, I can't just kind of take it off like a jacket and say well that was for there I need to go back to being something else. It's in the bloodstream and part of the DNA now. So that I have changed, therefore, the congregation, whatever congregation I am in, is going to be exposed to that process of change.

For me, the idea of meeting together regularly for prayer, study and friendship was essentially being disciplined. It gave a degree of accountability, which was helpful. This was true of the ministers meeting together and the more regular (for my group) local meetings.

Personally, I did not always enjoy the teaching content of the conferences, but I always came away energised and enthused. I learned things about myself, my attitudes and beliefs, my leadership style, my call to ministry and had new resources and ideas. Essentially, there were three groups that met: the main Path of Renewal group with other ministers, usually twelve people; the mentor group of ministers, usually six plus the mentor; and my own local group of twelve. I found meeting in these different groups particularly helpful and felt energised, whereas I often feel drained after meeting in other groups. I am not suggesting that everything was always positive. In fact, particularly at conferences, there was discussion of the state of the church or difficulties individuals were facing in their congregations. However, the relationships that were built up enabled honest reflection in a safe environment.

Without some sort of joint project, 'permission' to take time apart from parish ministry, and having a particular focus, it would be very difficult to replicate these positive relationships, but it surely would be worth trying.

The value of the process to the ministers involved was summed up by Fiona, who asked, "Why were we never always ministering like this?"

7.1.4 Ministers are people too.

Key finding 4: Ministers need the support and encouragement of the whole Church to enable them to prioritise disciple-making.

Jane Denniston's thesis on training for supervisors of ministry candidates highlights the demands it makes on already busy ministers and how the additional role may conflict with the expectation the congregation has of the minister. She states:

In this climate, expectations placed on ministers by the Church of Scotland at national level, for example, a growing burden of administration, service on Councils and committees, or acting as Interim Moderator in a vacancy even early in a new ministry can be onerous. Such responsibilities can be in conflict with the expectations of the local Church as, despite societal changes, congregations assume the minister will continue to offer the same level of pastoral care as previous generations of ministers. In these circumstances, a new minister can feel overwhelmed, quickly becoming exhausted and frustrated, trying to cope with the huge variety of demands on their time (Denniston 2018, 11).

I think that applies to every minister who takes on a role for the wider church⁵⁵ alongside their parish obligations. There was recognition of the fact that the ministers involved had spent lots of time thinking of the impact on the group or congregation, and they had not considered the impact of the process on themselves. Liam was the first to raise the issue:

I think also for me, it's not just about it being embedded and what will happen in the congregation, I think it's the impact it's had on many of the ministers who have engaged in this whole culture, and wherever they have gone, they have taken what they have learned, and they are doing that in their new congregations.

There was general agreement among the ministers, with one stating:

I think it's important to catch what Liam's saying there. Because we tend to be focusing on what has this done on the congregations, for obvious reasons. But it's actually done something to us as well, and that's just as much Path of Renewal as all the other stuff. So, I don't

⁵⁵ The Church of Scotland asks ministers to serve on Presbytery committees, national committees and Boards, be an Interim Moderator (performing the legal functions of a minister while a congregation is in vacancy), to supervise candidates for different forms of ministry, to attend courses and training, all while being a parish minister. Not all ministers take on additional roles.

know how it's shaking out for you David, but I think that's an important part of what this has done.

One minister commented,

“I imagine that we all know what we think we should be doing and feel terribly guilty about not doing it a lot of the time. So, being on Path of Renewal and that being part of it has certainly increased my intentionality and opened up the idea that a rule of faith can be quite a varied and wide thing.”

Another stated,

“...I think [it] deepened my understanding of myself. And, in that, that actually helped me work out why some things don't work for me, because they didn't connect with me. I started to see that a bit more clearly. So, you were able to kind of more guilt free to discard what's going on and actually take on something else which may be sort of completely outwith the tradition of what our institution would say is normative, but for me works. So that's fine. So that in some ways gave me permission to go beyond and be free to let things go and pick up and put down as appropriate and change it.”

As Denniston suggests, there are levels of expectation on ministers that make it difficult to get the balance of parish verses other roles right. In my experience, even although ministers are supposed to have two days per week off, many do not manage that. I say manage deliberately because I manage my own diary. I should be putting two days off in my calendar every week, but I have so many other calls on my time that it is impossible⁵⁶.

For me, being told that time had to be prioritised for Path of Renewal gave it importance and merited compliance. The Church of Scotland cannot expect ministers to keep on adding to their responsibilities and expect to see changes in congregations. I know I benefitted from being able to justify taking time to reflect, to read books on ecclesiology, mission or discipleship, and to attend conferences.

⁵⁶ I currently serve on the Faith Nurture Committee of Presbytery, the national People and Training sub-group of the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team, and I am a candidate supervisor and have recently stopped being an Interim Moderator in another congregation. As well as that I have to lead my congregation in working towards a union of four congregations, with three buildings and a ministry team of two full-time ministers and an unpaid Ordained Local Minister.

Speaking of the difficulties candidates face as they approach ministry, Denniston notes:

In these challenging times, our ministers need the best preparation possible for parish ministry and must see transformational leadership modelled if they are, in turn, to become transformational leaders (Denniston 2018, 211).

I believe this is also true of all ministry. Path of Renewal taught ministers to teach some people and reach more people. I saw that happen in my previous congregation. It worked the way it was supposed to for us, but it took modelling from minister to group to wider congregation. Most of all, it took time.

The fact that it took until being interviewed for some ministers to recognise changes in themselves speaks volumes. Ministers have many competing demands on their time, and they need help, support and encouragement and my experience is that the pressure Denniston speaks of, the expectations of the congregation, tends to take priority and is not always helpful, supportive or encouraging.

7.2 Key conclusions

In this thesis, I have discussed my experience of the Path of Renewal process and compared it to three alternative programmes that are, or have been, used by congregations to promote growth. I have argued that the Path of Renewal process was not designed specifically as a church growth tool but to promote cultural change in congregations. Numerical growth was given as one of the expected outcomes but was never the main priority. I have argued that the outcomes and expectations of the Path of Renewal process were vague and inconsistent and that, despite not being mentioned directly, discipleship became the main focus of the process. The lack of clear outcomes and expectations was detrimental to the process and, I believe, resulted from poor planning, implementation and governance of the process.

I discovered that although I had assumed a broadly shared understanding of what discipleship was, there is disquiet among some ministers and church members

over the words disciple and discipleship. I have learned that the terminology of disciple and discipleship requires explanation if it is to be properly understood, and my experience is that it is deeper and more fulfilling than I had imagined.

My interviews revealed that explaining the concept can change people's understanding and make them more likely to use the term. They also revealed that alongside explanation there needs to be practical application. A disciple is what you are; discipleship is what you do. Interviews also revealed that a focus on discipleship did bring about some of the cultural change that had been promised, but it is a longer and more complex process than participants had expected. Even after three years, some congregations had not seen any significant changes.

It is clear from the interviews that the participants appreciated and valued the Path of Renewal process, and all indicated that their faith had grown. That was my experience of the process. I valued the quality of teaching, the depth of sharing with other participants and in my own group and being held accountable as a member of the group.

It also became apparent that being authorised and run by a Council of the church was vital for the process to be accepted by members. This was not important to me, but I now see that any future process must have the approval and support of the Faith Nurture Forum or other central committee, if it is to have any chance of success. However, it is also noted that some participants felt that the structures and culture of the Church of Scotland made it difficult to do things differently. The expectations that congregations, and to some extent the wider church, have of ministers caused frustration and stress among ministerial participants. The Path of Renewal process gave ministers a sense of freedom to try new things and develop new discipleship practices.

I have argued that the outcomes of the process were varied. Some were much more successful than others. However, the benefits to the ministerial participants were not stated in the outcomes. They were: mutual support and encouragement that many said they had not experienced before; a feeling of having permission to experiment; a sense of personal growth; and excitement in seeing growth in others. During interviews, it became apparent that the groups

that spent more time together reported more change and were more enthusiastic about the process.

This process has deepened my sense that the issue of discipleship is probably the most important issue facing the Church of Scotland and the church in Scotland today. We do not need to ‘reinvent the wheel’. I have already mentioned some excellent reports and resources from other denominations from which we could learn. I believe that the Church of Scotland needs, even at a time of turmoil over Presbytery Planning, to actively pursue the development of discipleship among its members, therefore, I offer the following summary of my conclusions:

7.2.1 There is an urgent need to recover the words disciple and discipleship in the Church of Scotland.

My question was, “What have we learned from the ‘Path of Renewal’ process about participants’ understanding, experience and practice of Christian discipleship?”

I have shown that the answer is mixed. It is mixed partly because the process did not set out to be a discipleship process. It was not designed to promote discipleship. Nevertheless, I have argued that this was the most significant outcome of the process. All of the participants were in congregations that were actively looking for ways to change, having recognised that they were not being effective in reaching and keeping people. I return to Liam’s comment,

“So at the end of all of this process as we’ve talked through discipleship I thought, that’s what I’ve been doing, but I would never have called it that. You know, accompany maybe, walking together maybe, but never discipleship.”

I believe that there is discipleship going on in congregations, but people do not necessarily understand it as that. Every congregation has people who are doing their best to live for God. Naming this as discipleship would allow it to be more intentional. I agree with Bonhoeffer that discipleship is us together, not me on my own (Bonhoeffer, Kelly, and Godsey 2003, 205-212). I cannot disciple myself. I need to be disciplined and that requires other people to walk with me. Duncan expressed it as:

“It’s a relationship thing as you said earlier on. And you can have all the book knowledge, and all the theories and all the rest of it; but if you don’t have the relationship? I think that’s what makes a disciple. Yes, that relationship, never mind all the theories and the teaching, and all the rest of it..... we have to learn from each other, and we’re sharing, and everyone’s come with different experiences, and you’re at different stages of that relationship. And discipleship is a little bit about passing that on and helping other people on that journey.”

One minister commented,

“It’s maybe made me see it clearer and I think it’s given me a deeper understanding of, well, that discipleship is much more than just what Jesus and the twelve did, you know, it’s not just about this superhuman who is a disciple. That, in fact, we should all be disciples.

I believe we should recover the words because they are biblical and they still have value. I believe the argument that they are not used after the Book of Acts is misleading. The books of the New Testament were written at various times after Jesus’ ascension and it is likely that some books that do not use the word were written before those that do (Hale 1996, 129-133). While I accept that explanation will be required, I cannot find suitable alternatives that convey the challenge and privilege of being a disciple of Jesus.

I do not doubt that some people will argue that it is too hard, too time-consuming or not worth doing the work necessary to bother making the effort to recover use of the words, and some may even argue that promoting discipleship is too difficult, perhaps even divisive. There is no doubt that it will be complex and time-consuming but there is no reason it should be divisive. We know that much of what we do as congregations is not working in terms of remaining static, let alone growing. So why do we persist? What is there in the psyche of the Church of Scotland that means we identify a problem - years of decline - and we try as individual congregations to find answers like Purpose Driven Church or Natural Church Development?

But what about National initiatives? There is work being done in central committees around discipleship but there is no individual doing what Graham Duffin did for Path of Renewal. The structures of the church have made it difficult for leaders to emerge. It is not possible for the General Assembly, a body of some 550 people, to lead the church. It makes decisions, often

contradictory, and can instruct Presbyteries and congregations to act in certain ways, but it cannot lead. Path of Renewal came into being, and worked, because one person had the vision, drive and determination to see it through. And importantly, he was in the right place, at the right time, to convince the right committee to give him the opportunity.

7.2.2 Path of Renewal should be enhanced, not ignored and left to die.

I have a suspicion that since the contract for the project co-ordinator ended, the Panel of Review and Reform and the Mission and Discipleship Council have been disbanded and reformed, and because COVID made meeting incredibly difficult there is no plan for what to do with Path of Renewal now. If endorsement by the Church of Scotland was deemed to be important by Path of Renewal participants, the opposite is true. Without support there is no future for the process.

Participants in the process were chosen because they were already involved in trying to lead their congregations in new ways of doing things. They had at least tried to make changes in their congregations, even if the effect of those changes was limited. As I have explained, all of the process participants benefitted from their participation, even if their expectations of what would change were not met.

The Church of Scotland has since produced a booklet called 'Exploring Discipleship'. In explaining why the booklet has been written it states:

The aim is to help develop or create cultures of discipleship across the Kirk and help people take the next steps on their journey. No-one can tell you exactly what your local culture will look like because culture is built by and for your community - formed by all the ingredients of your context, and so a culture of discipleship will look different from place to place, it will flex with the people and personalities as they change over time (Clarke 2021, 2).

So far, so good. It then asks, 'What is discipleship?' and responds:

Discipleship is a God-ward transformation which takes place when individuals and communities intentionally, sacrificially and consistently live every aspect of their daily life in commitment to following Jesus Christ. It is a lifelong, whole-life reorientation which will have challenging implications for our self-identity, our belonging within community, our belief systems and our daily behaviour.

A shorter pithier expression, from Micah 6:8 (NRSV) would be: What the Lord requires of us is to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God (Clarke 2021, 2).

I have already indicated that I agree with the first definition and would choose to use it, however, the second reference to Micah 6:8 is not a definition of discipleship. Yes, it is short and pithy, but that is the problem. While it is something to aspire to, it says nothing of sacrifice, transformation or belonging in community.

The book continues,

Is it for individual study or group discussion?

It is not written as a group study guide but we hope it might spark some inquiries - so feel free to use it any way you like. Every section is followed by a set of questions to help you think about the themes and issues raised. The questions could be used individually or in groups.

What comes next?

This booklet is part of a stream of new resources that we are creating to help build discipleship (Clarke 2021, 2).

Given the demands placed on ministers, I do not believe that it is enough to offer a booklet and some videos that people can choose to watch on their own, or with a group. Unless there is accountability to someone, or a group, I think it unlikely that this will be given priority. It is better than nothing, but barely. I am sympathetic to the need for resources, and I appreciate the time and effort that has gone into producing this booklet, but it all seems quite vague. Creating resources to 'help build discipleship' is slightly missing the point, especially suggesting that it can be done on your own. There are already hundreds of

resources about discipleship⁵⁷. What is missing is the practice of discipling, therefore, this needs to become a priority for the whole Church of Scotland.

I do not think it is significant whether the name Path of Renewal is maintained or not, but I believe the national Church should have a national process to promote discipleship and help make disciples. For me, there is very little effort, energy and money being put into discipleship by the central Church, so there is very little return. The essential elements of the Path of Renewal process could be updated to make it a dedicated discipleship training process. The aims and objectives would need to be clarified and reworded, but the process has already shown that it produces disciples.

7.3 In closing

Providing a resource that helps make disciples would enable congregations to utilise the teaching element of Path of Renewal and be better prepared for the changes they will be required to make in the future. Now is the ideal time to implement these suggestions as many congregations are currently facing closure, linkage or union. They are in Bridge's neutral zone and struggling with the transition. Now is the time to encourage congregations to pursue discipleship together. Of course, there would be significant financial costs, but if the Church is convinced that discipleship is the right thing to focus on then we should learn the lessons of Path of Renewal.

The Path of Renewal process was the most challenging, stimulating, exciting and encouraging endeavour I have been involved in.

There is not one way of making disciples. There are no guarantees, and we know that it takes time. That is the beauty of the Path of Renewal process. Each person finds a way that suits their group and their congregation. There is no magic formula. My story is not your story, and you and your congregation will be

⁵⁷ A basic search online produces hundreds of links to books, courses, sermons and other materials relating to discipleship.

called by God to do different things to other congregations. What is important is that we act, or the Church will die.

The last word goes to Fiona:

There is no perfect church that we are aiming to be. There is no Halcyon day that we will get back to. There is a journey. There is only constant change. There's only following after God. There is only seeking and building the kingdom and that everything else is actually a false hope.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Initial Information

Church of Scotland

Panel on Review and Reform in partnership with Ministries Council

Pilot Projects - Path of Renewal

1. Background

1.1 The Panel on Review and Reform carried out a series of Presbytery Consultations in the autumn of 2014, with invitations issued to representatives from every Presbytery, and drawing in members from the Ministries Council and the Mission and Discipleship Council to help deliver these days. Over 80% of Presbyteries attended and at the Consultations a proposal to develop a pilot scheme to take a few congregations on a “path of renewal”, received positive feedback. The proposal was also received positively at the Presbytery Conference which the Ministries Council held at the end of January.

1.2 The proposal is to look for 20 congregations from a range of backgrounds who will undertake a process of renewal and re-focussing. They would be seen as the “ground breakers” who others will follow (and from whom others will learn.) This involves helping congregations to transition from maintaining current patterns, using an attractional approach to one which seeks to take account of context with a missional approach. (See appendix 1.)

1.3 An initial assessment and discernment process will be followed by a 2 to 3 year period when input would be provided to help the congregations and minister develop a missional approach.

2. Desired Outcomes

Ministers equipped to lead through transition and in missional churches.

Congregations with a missional focus & a team approach to ministry.

The development of new local leadership.

The development of a proven approach to transitioning churches from which others will benefit.

Although not the primary focus, it is hoped that some of those who become involved as leaders at a local congregational level will subsequently sense a call to Ministry of Word & Sacrament within the national church.

3. Deciding on Pilots May - Dec 2015

The process of deciding on the congregations to be included in the pilots is a crucial part of the process. It is important to recruit those who will commit to the process and as a consequence a commitment to the “direction of travel” is more important than the starting point of the journey. The process is as follows:

Presbyteries are invited to nominate congregations to be considered as pilot churches by 30th June 2015. Presbyteries with fewer than 31 charges are invited to make one nomination. Those with 31 charges or more are invited to nominate one church per 30 or part of 30.

A series of overnight conferences will be held in early September. The minister plus Session Clerk (or other office bearer) from nominated congregations will be invited to one of the conferences where the thinking behind the pilots will be outlined and what will be required of minister, Kirk Session and congregation. An individual consultation with each minister and Session Clerk would form part of the conference.

September to November will allow for a two month “discernment period” during which Minister and Session Clerk would be expected to facilitate discussion with their Kirk Session, with a designated member of the Panel or staff member available to the congregation during this period. The Panel member will meet with the minister and Kirk Session at least once during this process and a report shall be completed by the Panel member, minister and Session Clerk which all parties shall have sight of.

in early December, the minister and one other from their congregation, will be invited to attend a meeting with 2 representatives from the group who will make the decision on which congregations will be involved in the pilot.

In January 2016 a decision will be made on the pilot congregations, with feedback given to all congregations and ministers who were nominated.

The assessment criteria will include:

1. Ministers who recognise the necessity for change, have the gifts to lead through change and a willingness to work with a leadership team.
2. Ministers who are open to engaging in a learning process and reflecting on the changing nature of church life in 21st Century Scotland.
3. Kirk Sessions who are supportive of change and are willing to be involved in championing change within the wider congregation.
4. Congregations who have individuals with the skills and commitment to engage in developing the work and witness of the church in new ways.
5. Ministers and Kirk Sessions who are committed to supporting other churches through the process after they have engaged in it.
6. Presbyteries which are in a position to offer support to ministers and congregations through this process.

4. Initial work - February 2016

A three-day conference on “Leading a congregation through Renewal” will be held for ministers involved in the pilots. This will give the ministers a common language and understanding and create a learning community which will continue beyond the conference. (This will be done in two groups of ten.)

Each of the pilots will develop in different ways, but one of the key objectives is to create new local leadership. As a consequence, the development of a small leadership team is seen as a key early objective.

It needs to be clear from the start that the intention with the pilots is not to bring leaders in from outwith the parish, but to develop new local leadership within the local church and parish.

5. Ongoing Work

A programme will be available to assist ministers and congregations in developing their ongoing work and creating a missionary ethos within the congregations. (See appendix 2 below.)

Part of the approach will rest on considering the lessons to be learnt from research into church growth and the factors which lead to growth. However the approach will seek to be principled rather than pragmatic engaging with scripture and culture in an authentic way. Three strands are seen as key:

1. Rediscovering our calling as the Church in 21st century Scotland. This will include the importance of rooting people in faith - creating disciples, not members.
2. Developing a readiness to engage with those in our communities in fresh, creative, relevant ways and to build new work taking account of what will help others.
3. Creating structures which will support and enable new work to thrive and develop positively.

In this we want to learn from others, and will draw heavily on the work of Alan Roxburgh, the founder of the *Missional Network* - an international group committed to partnering with and developing missional churches and mission shaped leaders. However, the development of an approach which is suitable and appropriate for the Church of Scotland is seen as crucial and will be a key part of the work of the Pilots.

During this phase the pilot churches would benefit from:

1. an overnight conference every 6 months for the minister, gathering together those involved in the pilot congregations and helping them develop key leadership skills and strategies.
2. A mentor will meet bi-monthly with the minister, helping them to root the teaching from the conferences into their own local context.
3. Cluster meetings will be held bi-monthly, facilitated by a mentor with five ministers from pilot churches.
4. Support for the leadership team will be provided by an experienced facilitator (someone with experience in transition and team development) and there will be an annual opportunity for teams to attend a regional day conference.
5. Additional parish staff employed if required for individual congregation, but at the level of one or two days a week, and (at least initially) to

support the existing work while the minister commits to developing the new work and specifically new leaders. These new posts might suit (for example) recently retired people with pastoral skills.

6. Financial commitment from congregations

In normal circumstances, congregations will be expected to contribute £1,000 a year which will pay for some of the costs of the facilitator and the mentor working with the congregation and minister. However, the ability of a congregation to pay this will not be a deciding factor in the choice of pilot churches. In such circumstances, Presbyteries might consider reducing the Ministry & Mission allocation of the congregation by £1,000 to facilitate their involvement.

7. Assessing the effectiveness of the Process

Dr Rita Welsh, Lecturer and researcher at Queen Margaret University, will assist with this part of the work. We are aware of the need to complete this in order to learn from the process and are grateful to Queen Margaret University for their willingness to partner with us in this.

8. The Phase which follows

The lessons learnt from the pilots will be used in developing the work further, and there is an expectation that the congregations involved in the pilots will help to resource the next tranche of congregations.

Appendix

A missional approach

Alan J Roxburgh, president of *The Missional Network* has been involved in discussions on creating missional churches for over 15 years. In his book "Missional - Joining God in the Neighborhood" he resists writing a definition of what a "missional approach" looks like or how you define a "missional church." However, what is clear is that the approach is about helping churches transition from an insular approach to one where we engage in meaningful ways with those

around us. An approach which leaves no one unchanged. It goes far beyond holding mission events to attract people along to what we currently do, but cuts right through to the heart of who we are called to be and what we are called to do as God's people.

Developing the Programme

The programme will take account the work of a number of "experts" in this field, all of whom point to ways of working through transition. These include:

Alan J Roxburgh, The Missional Leader, Missional Church and Missional Map-making,

Diana Butler Bass, Christianity for the Rest of us - how the neighbourhood church is transforming the faith,

William Bridges: Managing Transitions - making the most of change.

We also want to learn from others who are actively pursuing assisting congregations and ministers in transition, including.

The Diocese of Coventry who have been using Natural Church Development material in all of their churches

http://www.dioceseofcoventry.org/?page_ref=m185 We plan to follow up with them about the effectiveness of the approach they have taken and the lessons we might learn from this

Forge Canada have developed a two-year programme for churches entitled "Ethos" which helps churches transition from a "maintenance to missional approach." They have been working with congregations and denominations for 8 years in this process, gaining insights as they have done so. Conversations are being held with them about the lessons we might learn from what they have developed.

Appendix 2: Outcomes and explanatory information

Path of Renewal Pilot

Making disciples who make disciples

Desired Outcomes

The original proposal for the Pilot set out the following outcomes:

- Ministers equipped to lead through transition and in missional churches.
- Vibrant, growing congregations with a missional focus & a team approach to ministry.
- The development of new local leadership.
- The development of a proven approach to transitioning churches from which others will benefit.
- That at least some of those who become involved as leaders at a local congregational level will subsequently sense a call to Ministry of Word & Sacrament within the national church.

Programme for pilot Churches

The programme being developed has six steps:

Step 1

Formation of a local leadership team of 5 to 8 members from different backgrounds and different generations.

Step 2

The development of this group as individuals and as a team, with deepening faith, commitment and confidence.

Step 3

The development of appropriate missional initiatives by the team. This might be as simple as members of the team creating better relationships with their neighbours, work colleagues or those they socialise with.

Step 4

Creating of effective opportunities for those who do not currently attend church activities or worship to explore and be nurtured in faith and to experience Christian community.

Step 5

Providing opportunities for new people to be involved in missional initiatives.

Step 6

Adapting of the “mainstream” church programme to take account of what is being learnt and to allow a coming together of those involved in the new initiatives with those involved in current activities and worship.

Important Note

These should not be seen as consecutive steps – for example, steps 2 and 3 will be intertwined as will steps 4 & 5. Some people learn by “doing” or find that faith is stimulated as they work alongside others rather than sit talking about faith!

Similarly, step 6 should be one that takes place consecutively with 3, 4 and 5.

Developmental Outcomes

It would be possible to measure developmental outcomes based on the above:

1. Formation of a local leadership team
2. The spiritual and practical growth of the individuals in the team and of the group as a team

3. The creating of Missional Activities (or participation in existing activities) which allow a deepening of relationships between team members and those who do not claim Christian faith or are not engaged with traditional church.
4. Seeing some people from outwith church think more deeply about faith and being given appropriate opportunities to share in Christian community.
5. Seeing some of this group engaged in practical works of service and using their God given gifts.
6. The local church adapting and change the way it functions to take account of lessons being learnt in order to sustain further development.

Important Note

There is danger in seeing this as a process that people can somehow control, whilst we recognise that we are engage simply in creating opportunities. It is God by His Spirit who opens eyes, stirs faith and brings spiritual growth. Even when Simon Peter recognises Jesus as Messiah, Jesus tells him that Peter knows this because he has listened to the Father, who has revealed it to him. Jesus himself had not created the “perfect, fool-proof system” but simply given opportunity for people to hear from God and respond appropriately.

Final Outcomes

These should be based on the Desired Outcomes set out at the beginning and might include:

1. Ministers who can act as mentors for other churches ready to move through this process.
2. A local leadership team who are committed to sustaining and developing a missional approach, supporting members to be good neighbours, friends, family and to use their gifts in appropriate ways in different settings.
3. Some local leaders who are ready to consider a primary leadership role in a church.
4. A growing percentage of members who are using their gifts and talents not only in the church but also in work in their community or more widely.
5. A growing percentage of members who express a confidence in speaking about their faith and who can express the relevance of their faith for everyday life.
6. Churches which are seeing an increasing number of people come to faith in Christ and grow in that faith.
7. Churches who have made appropriate changes to allow new developments and new people to be sustained and nurtured within the overall pattern of church life.

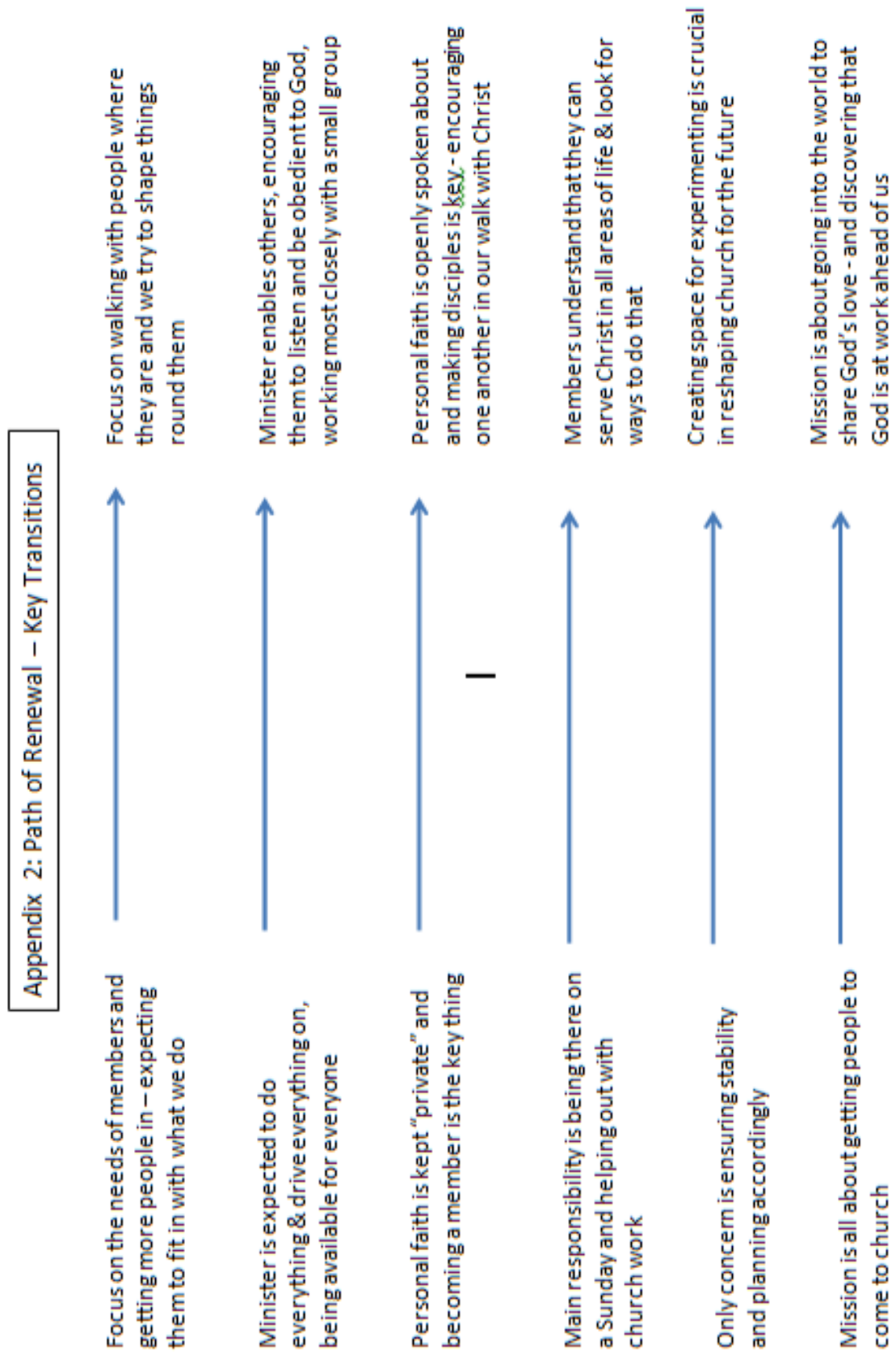
Appendix 3: Amended Goals and Objectives

Path of Renewal Goals & Objectives

- Ensuring those in key leadership roles play the role of enablers and equippers
- Rooting members in their walk with Christ, deepening faith and commitment
- Building leaders - discerning those with leadership gifts and helping them to develop both character and expertise for leadership
- Creating Christian community where all relationships are governed by Kingdom values and where relevant, inspiring worship has a central place
- Equipping members to live for Christ in their families, work place, communities and the world and to be agents of change, seeking to bring Kingdom values
- To be active partners with other in community initiatives which are helping to bring positive transformation to lives and communities – recognising God at work in and through these.
- Equipping members to give a “reason for the hope that is in them” and encouraging members to speak appropriately about their faith.
- Creating opportunities for those interested in exploring faith to do so.

Appendix 4: Key Transitions Document

Appendix 2: Key Transitions document



Appendix 5: Suggested reading list

Path of Renewal

Some helpful books:

The Missional Leader, Alan J Roxburgh, Fred Romanuk

Missional Map-Making: Skills for leading in times of transition, Alan J Roxburgh

Missional: Joining God in the neighbourhood, Alan J Roxburgh

The New Parish: How Neighbourhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community, Paul Sparks and Tim Soerens

Managing Transitions: Making the most of change, William Bridges

The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's most difficult moments, William Bridges

Leading Missional Communities, Mike Breen

Building a Discipling Culture, Mike Breen

The Shaping of Things to Come, Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch

Christianity for the rest of us, Diana Butler Bass

Grounded, Diana Butler Bass

Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith, Henri Nouwen

Unapologetic, Francis Spufford

Discipleship and the people called Methodist, A PDF Download from The Methodist Church (Methodist.org.uk)

The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable, Nassim Nicholas Taleb

The Tipping Point, Malcolm Gladwell

Appendix 6: Questions asked of Ministers

Questions put to ministers were:

- Tell me a bit about your congregation before your involvement in the Path of Renewal (POR) process?
- What was it about Path of Renewal that you found attractive?
- Do you think at the beginning of the process, you had a really good understanding of what was going to be involved in it?
- So, did you all find that was the case, that the being together and doing together and supporting each other was good, was helpful?
- Before getting involved with Path of Renewal was that a focus of your ministry? Or for those of you who were new in the charge, would you have intended that to be a focus of your ministry?
- How did you work out who you would ask to join your Path of Renewal group in your congregation? How many people did you end up with in your group?
- Can you tell me about what you did as a group? How often you met? And was there a kind of format to your meetings?
- Would you have called yourself a disciple before you started the process?
- Has your understanding of what it is to be a disciple changed because of your involvement in the process?
- One of the things that occasionally as we went through the process we talked about Rule of Life or spiritual disciplines, so has the way you practice your faith in those kind of terms changed?
- What about any specific changes in the lives of your group members?
- We've talked a bit about looking for cultural change. Would you say you achieved that in the three years?
- How important was it for you that this was an official Church of Scotland initiative? CAIRN does something incredibly similar. So would it have made a difference if it was CAIRN giving you those tools?
- If you were to leave your current charge now is Path of Renewal embedded enough to continue?
- Last question, Path of Renewal, has it been worth it for you?

Appendix 5: Questions asked of Elders

The questions for non-ministers were:

- In what ways were you involved in the life of the church before your involvement in the Path of Renewal (POR) process?
- Why did you decide to join the POR group?
- What did you expect to gain from participating in the group?
- Before joining the group what did you understand by the terms disciple and discipleship?
- Before joining the group would you have called yourself a disciple?
- How would you relate your understanding of discipleship to your own life and faith?
- Tell me about what you did as a group? How often did you meet? Was there a particular format?
- Has your understanding of discipleship changed because of your participation in the POR group?
 - If not, is there something that could have enhanced your understanding?
 - If yes, in what ways has it changed?
- Has the way you practice your faith changed because of your participation in the POR group?
 - If not, what might encourage you to change the way you practice your faith?
 - If yes, how have you changed and what, specifically, prompted this change?
- Can you identify any specific changes in the lives of group members as a result of POR?
- Can you identify any specific changes in the congregation as a result of POR?
- How important was it to you that the POR process was instituted, organised, and authorised by central committees of the Church of Scotland?
- Have you been involved in any other transformation, church growth or discipleship processes in the past?
 - If so, how does that experience compare to the POR process?

- Now that the pilot process has ended, are you going continue the work you started as a group or individually?

Appendix 6: Path of Renewal Research form

Path of Renewal Research

I am writing a PhD thesis on Path of Renewal and would appreciate it if you could take time to answer these three questions which will help me with my research. Your email address is automatically forwarded with your answer, however, in line with University regulations, no personal information will be used and for research purposes all responses are kept anonymous and will be used solely for the purposes of my research. You will not be contacted as a result of your response.⁵⁸

1. Do you know what the Path of Renewal process is?

Yes No

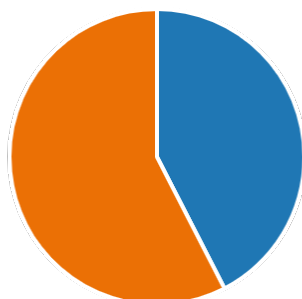
2. Before becoming a candidate was your congregation involved in the Path of Renewal process?

Yes No

3. Did involvement in the Path of Renewal process influence your call to ministry?

Yes No

1. Do you know what the Path of Renewal process is?⁵⁹



Yes 14 No 19

⁵⁸ Form was produced in Microsoft Forms and was accessible at <https://forms.office.com/pages/designpagev2.aspx?lang=en-GB&origin=OfficeDotCom&route=Start&subpage=design&id=f4cZu3Ni40etmAGdjzIP78cq86mzEj5KuSstGK0ZD7dUMzNWT0VQU1FYMDEyUEZCVVdET1dXNEtOOS4u>

⁵⁹ All positive answers have one extra due to a test of the form being carried out.

2. Before becoming a candidate was your congregation involved in the Path of Renewal process?



3. Did involvement in the Path of Renewal process influence your call to ministry?



