

Dissertation

Chapter 1: Introduction

The central question for this dissertation is:

In what ways can Alternative Worship communities engage with the spiritual needs of both church leavers and non-churched seekers?

I ask this question as someone who is involved in an Alternative Worship community, called Morph. This community was started over five years ago by a group of ‘church leavers’, some of whom had physically left the church and others – although still regularly attending services and being involved – no longer found the church to be a place where their faith could grow or where they could meet with God. Jamieson calls this group of people ‘internal leavers’. (2004, p6)

More recently, people with minimal past church contact have become involved in the community. This has raised questions as to how the community needs to change in order to meet their needs and also to fulfil its own values. Two of its stated values in the ways it seeks to engage in mission are:

- Being aware of the ‘backdoor’ of the established church, engaging with people in their questions, doubts and struggles, and journeying with them.
- Being aware of those who are beginning to ask questions about the Christian faith, and giving them space to ask their own questions, as we engage in genuine dialogue with them.

The question now for the community is, ‘How do we do this?’ As we recognise the different experiences, understanding of language, knowledge of the Christian story and the different questions that these people have, our challenge is how we respond.

The central question for this research was very much borne out of the experiences of this particular Alternative Worship community. However, through reading and

conversations with others involved in Alternative Worship, I have discovered there are other people asking similar questions.

Chapter 2 of the dissertation is a literature review. This includes some books which have been very influential, both before I started this research and during the research process. Riddell's books 'Threshold of the Future' (1998) and 'The Prodigal Project' (2000), which he co-authored, have been the most influential in forming my thinking in recent years. Tomlinson's 'The Post-Evangelical' (1995) and Jamieson's 'A Churchless Faith' (2002) have also had a significant impact on my thinking. In my experience of church I had the same thoughts and feelings that Riddell describes – 'boredom,' 'a lack of connection and meaning,' 'loneliness,' a feeling of being 'a visitor from another planet' and 'outside of it all'. (2000, p12) This often led me to ask the same question as Riddell does here, 'What is wrong with me?' (2000, p13) One of the members of Morph once wrote that 'we are considered the church's awkward squad'.

Through talking with people in Morph and reading these books I realized that I was not alone in feeling this way, but I still struggled at church. As I began reading for this research I came across Lynch's 'After religion: 'Generation X' and the search for meaning' (2002). I found this book both exciting and liberating. It helped me to see myself, and those at Morph, not as awkward or as having something wrong with them, but as a product of their generation. This led me to think that maybe there is something wrong with the church if it is failing to connect not just with me, but with most people of my generation. Other books, such as Tacey's book on spirituality (2004), gave me both hope and a sense that the role of Alternative Worship in contextualizing the gospel for contemporary culture is a vital one.

Following on from the literature review, Chapter 3 is a record of the focus group with members of the Morph community, and Chapter 4 is a record of interviews I conducted with representatives from Alternative Worship communities from all over the country. I have kept these three chapters separate from each other in order that the voices from the literature, the focus group and the interviews may each be heard on their own. These views and ideas are then brought together in Chapter 5 where common themes and differences between the literature, the focus group and the

interviews are discussed. In Chapter 6 the focus returns to the central question of the research. It considers how far we can answer this question, what can be drawn from the insights afforded to us by the research, and what the implications might be for Alternative Worship and the future of the church.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The range of literature reviewed includes books which look specifically at Alternative Worship, books which discuss various ‘fresh expressions’ of church, and those which examine the future of Christianity and the church. The review also discusses books which look at church leaving and those which track people’s faith journeys post-church. In addition it considers books on contemporary spirituality and culture, religion and the church today, and on mission. Some of the books which focus on trends in church attendance and contemporary spirituality draw pessimistic conclusions about the future of the church. However, most of the literature considered here looks at the opportunities for mission which contemporary culture offers the church and imagines the shape of the church in the future. The books have different visions of what the church in the future might look like, but they do imagine a future.

Some of the books are written mainly about the situation in America, such as Sine (1999) and Kimball (2004), and although some interesting insights can be drawn from these books, caution needs to be applied in using them to look at the situation in the U.K.; as Kimball states you ‘can’t quite compare England and America’ (2004, p210). Other books, such as Jamieson (2002 and 2004), look primarily at New Zealand. Although New Zealand is much closer to the U.K. in terms of patterns of church attendance and spirituality, there are certain differences which need to be recognized. Although other authors write from different countries in the West they discuss specifically the situation in the U.K.

This review will start at the present – church, culture and spirituality in Britain today. Lynch states ‘The Christian Church in Britain is going through an extraordinary period of change. The rapidly declining rates in church attendance lead some sociologists to suggest that it is entering a phase of near-terminal decline from which it is unlikely ever to recover to any significant extent.’ (2002, p3) This decline in

church attendance is not disputed by any of the books. However as Drane asserts, ‘On the one hand is the inescapable fact that, throughout the Western world, the Church as we know it is in decline. On the other, there is the equally incontrovertible fact that we live in a time when the overt search for spiritual meaning has never been more intense than it is now.’ (2000, p55) So the question most of these books, and indeed the church, faces is, ‘Can the Christian church respond to people’s search for spiritual meaning?’ If not then the church could well be in ‘near-terminal decline’, but if it can, then we can start re-imagining church for the twenty-first century.

All of the books discuss this rise in spiritual interest. Research conducted by the BBC found that ‘more than 76 per cent of the population would admit to having had a spiritual experience’, and that ‘compared with 25 years ago, the rise is greater than 110 per cent’. (Tacey, 2004, p15) Tacey encourages religion to set up dialogue with popular spirituality, to build bridges and to take risks. He asserts, ‘If religion wants to have a future, it must allow itself to be seen not only as an institution, but also as a mystery that can feed and nourish the spiritually starving world.’ (2004, 190) Whereas Tacey emphasizes the links between spirituality and religion, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) treat them almost as opposites. They link spirituality firmly within the ‘New Age’ movement and the search for truth within oneself and the world around them. They contrast this with religion which looks for truth beyond the world and the individual. I think this polarization is unhelpful and limits the accessibility of religion to those who hold a particular worldview, and one which is in decline in contemporary society. The ‘New Age’ movement’s emphasis on holistic spirituality, the sacredness of creation, the use of the symbolic and the emphasis on the spiritual, could be viewed as points of engagement with Christian spirituality.

Lynch writes about the worldview predominantly held by the ‘Baby Buster’ generation – the so called ‘Generation X’ (those born in the 1960s or 1970s). In their search for meaning ‘there is a basic scepticism to the received or pre-packaged truths of churches, political parties or commercial organisations.’ (2002, p31) Rather there is ‘an emphasis on the open-ended, creative and personally authentic search for meaning.’ (2002, p47)

Having looked at spirituality and religion in contemporary culture we have been given some reasons why the churches might struggle to persuade people to come through the front door, but why is it losing so many people out of the back door? Richter and Francis state, 'Church leaving will have to do with Baby Busters' suspicion of easy answers; their scepticism towards 'hype' and manipulation; their unwillingness to be treated as passive consumers; their hunger to have all their senses satisfied; their desire to 'be their own person', in their own style, rather than simply follow the crowd or the dictates of denominational tradition.' (1998, pp49-50) Their parents – the Baby Boomer generation – are leaving the church 'because they find them to be too much like other institutions and lacking authenticity and credibility; they reject 'pre-packaged' religion; they find churches too dogmatic and conformist; they sense that their values and lifestyle are not welcome at church; they feel stunted by the church in their spiritual and personal growth, and they look in vain for their church to be genuinely concerned for wider social and global issues.' (Richter and Francis, 1998, p148)

However, leaving the church and leaving God are not the same thing as Richter and Francis state, 'most who leave the church do not lose faith.' (1998, *pix*) Cray supports this, however he then goes on to write, 'Despite popular belief to the contrary, to move out of the Church is often to move out of Christianity, for the children of the leavers if not for them themselves.' (1997, p9) When Jamieson went back to the church leavers he had interviewed five years earlier he discovered that many had started or joined post-church groups. These groups provided a place to talk about their faith, discuss questions and to build friendships and community. 'Of those who went on to develop a stronger and more definite Christian faith the vast majority were part of such groups.' (2004, p149) This supports Cray in so far as those who find ways of being part of a Christian community develop a stronger faith, whereas those who 'go it alone' can struggle to grow in their faith or fail to encourage their children in the Christian faith.

The figures for church leaving are not insignificant. Richter and Francis report, 'It has been estimated that 1500 people leave British churches each week, not counting those who die, or simply transfer to another church.' (1998, *pxii*) With so few coming in the front door and the back door wide open, should we agree that the church is in 'near-

terminal decline', or can we find a reason to hope? What should the response of the church be?

Many of the books suggest the churches' first response should be repentance and mourning. The Mission-shaped Church report states, 'this is [also] a moment for repentance. We have allowed our culture and the Church to drift apart, without our noticing.' (2004, p13) Tacey claims, 'mourning is what the churches should be doing, instead of insisting on songs of praise and attitudes of celebration and jubilation that, at the end of the day, are forms of denial and resistance. I find the Western churches sad in their inability to mourn, and their insistence on up-beat and jubilant services which fly in the face of the world's spiritual suffering.' (2004, p160) It is a call for the church to be honest, to face both its own decline and slipping into irrelevancy, and also to look at the spiritual hunger and lostness of contemporary culture. Repentance and mourning should not lead to despair but to mission. If the church stays in denial then it will make itself irrelevant.

The Mission-shaped Church report also states, 'If the Church is not missionary it has denied itself and its calling, for it has departed from the very nature of God.' (2004, p41) All of the literature read supports this view. Riddell writes, 'the church does violence to its own identity as the church of Christ whenever it ceases to express its missionary nature. Mission is not an optional extra for the church. The church needs the continual renewal which is provided by mission, if it is to maintain its authenticity.' (1998, p13) The centrality of mission to the Christian faith is not disputed by any of the literature. However, there are two distinct views of culture which shape that mission. As Lynch describes it, 'One approach tends to regard popular culture with suspicion as a potentially dangerous source of beliefs, values, and practices that are antithetical to Christian faith. The other tends to view popular culture more positively as a medium that can even help to promote new and creative understandings of Christian faith.' (2005, p34) There is also a different approach from those who see mission primarily in terms of evangelism and conversion, and those who have a wider view of mission. As Croft writes 'Mission seen in this wider sense of proclaiming the kingdom embraces seeking justice for the poor, working for peace and reconciliation throughout the world, and appropriate care for the environment God has entrusted to us.' (2002, p138) Many books suggest the language of 'journey'

is more helpful than that of 'conversion' and encourage us to move away from 'them and us' categories.

Riddell claims, 'One of the great discoveries of twentieth-century theology has been the *missio dei*. This is the understanding that the mission of God precedes and creates the church. The church is invited to respond and participate, but it neither possesses nor controls mission. The Spirit is at work in the world, drawing the world toward Christ; actively luring people who have no contact with the institutional church.' (1998, p118) Gibbs and Bolger state, 'The *missio Dei* respects all recipients of the gospel as it identifies with them in their world. Emerging churches seek to embrace this comprehensive understanding of the *missio Dei*.' (2006, p53) It is this incarnational view of mission, that God is active in people's lives outside of the institutional church, and indeed God is active in contemporary culture, which characterizes Alternative Worship communities. Cray warns of the danger of 'developing a naïveté about postmodern culture'. (1997, p10) However, most of the books which advocate an incarnational view of mission also comment on the counter-cultural nature of that mission as well. Riddell writes that Alternative Worship communities 'have a commitment to move beyond complicity with the Western values of materialism and individualism, and instead demonstrate some of the qualities of Jesus and his kingdom.' (1998, p171)

Contextualization is seen as key to mission. Ward writes, 'Only by locating church within culture can we find ways to develop a distinctive Christian expression within that culture.' (2002, p16) Bosch writes at length about 'mission as contextualization' and asserts, 'We therefore have to adopt a firm stand against every attempt at a non- or under-contextualized approach in mission.' (1991, p426) He links this contextualization to the model of the incarnation with the 'gospel being "en-fleshed", "em-bodied" in a people and its culture'. (1991, p454) Dialogue rather than apologetics, story rather than doctrine, metaphor rather than exact expressions, are seen to be much more effective and authentic ways to engage in mission to contemporary culture.

Finally this literature review turns to look at books written about Alternative Worship and emerging churches or fresh expressions. Mission-shaped Church lists twelve

different fresh expressions of church, including Alternative Worship communities. Moynagh also lists a number of emerging churches similar to the list in *Mission-shaped Church*, but he is cautious about including 'Alternative Worship' in this list. He claims, 'Many people have equated emerging church with new forms of worship, not least "alternative worship". There is an overlap, but it is easily exaggerated.' (2004, p23) His caution is based on his assertion that 'Mission is not generally a high priority. Some groups are uncomfortable with blatant evangelism, seeing it as too directive and narrow. Others are so preoccupied with sustaining their new life that they have little time to reach out.' (2004, p23) In contrast Gibbs and Bolger firmly equate Alternative Worship communities with emerging church and claim, 'emerging churches are not young-adult services, Gen-X churches, churches-within-a-church, seeker churches, purpose-driven, new paradigm churches, fundamentalist churches, or even evangelical churches.' (2006, p235) The language of emerging churches is therefore not easy to define with any consensus.

Many of the books about Alternative Worship share Moynagh's view that mission is not high on the agenda of Alternative Worship groups, however many other books – particularly the ones written by those involved in Alternative Worship – put forward the opposite claim. Gibbs and Bolger define emerging churches as not 'a different style of church adapted to a particular age range. Rather, we are talking about a radically different ecclesiology that reflects the church's call to mission in a post-Christendom and postmodern context.' (2006, p65) They argue that many fresh expressions do not engage sufficiently with post-modern culture. This quote also reveals their belief that emerging churches are essentially missiological communities. This belief is echoed by many of the books written by those involved in Alternative Worship, and is a point that will be returned to in Chapter 5.

Among the books written either by people directly involved in Alternative Worship, or by people who have based their books on interviews with those involved, there is a huge amount of agreement both in terms of belief and practice. Although each community is different in character because of the context in which it exists, the core values and practices tend to be the same.

Their beliefs and practices are inspired by the incarnation and focus on the life and teaching of Christ. This focus on the incarnation inspires both their worship – using popular culture to resource worship – and their mission. Their worship is creative and participatory – the creation of the act of worship is seen as part of the worship – and the worship provides opportunities for a variety of responses. Leadership is viewed as ‘servanthood’, the role being to resource and facilitate the life of the community, if it is there at all. ‘A commitment to real participation also means that the worship will not be led by a single figurehead, either in preparation or in production. Leadership will move around the group and the space. The ‘front’ may be as difficult to determine as the leader.’ (Kirkpatrick, Pierson and Riddell, 2000, p70) It draws upon both the ancient – such as liturgy and icons – and the very modern – such as multimedia images and techno chants – to resource the worship. It views the worship space as very important and seeks to make it visually attractive. Worship enables people to connect their lives and culture to the gospel through the use of music, ritual, silence, image and symbol, and looks for ways to involve the whole person, their bodies and senses. They seek to destroy the sacred/secular split and move to ‘whole life’ spirituality. Alternative Worship groups are ‘thoroughly politicized in relation to social justice and environmental issues and show strong commitment to gender equality. The relative lack of debate in alternative worship groups over these issues contrasts with mainstream evangelical culture.’ (Baker, Gay and Brown, 2003, px) Importance is placed on creating a community of openness and hospitality, and creating a safe space for worship – a place where everyone feels accepted and valued. This is also a place where doubt, pain, anger, hurt and disappointment can be expressed. It values the place of story and the space for each person to share their story.

Above all, perhaps, Alternative Worship communities are about creating worship that is meaningful to them. As Kirkpatrick, Pierson and Riddell write, ‘We cannot hope to ‘run a show’ for others. We must seek to create a place that cuts into our own hearts and souls, where the God can stir and soothe, rend and reunite us. If we can create something which is authentic for ourselves and the people with whom we stand, then perhaps others will identify with what we have begun to build, value the opportunity to make their own contribution, and join with us in our adventure. Around the fire the

travellers gather; seeking realness, safety, honesty, integrity, openness, and tough love.’ (2000, pp36-37)

Chapter 3: Focus Group with a local Alternative Worship community

A series of questions were developed which would initially be asked in a focus group and then later in a series of interviews. The questions were written using the ‘funnel approach’. ‘The funnel approach is so named because it starts off the module with a very broad question and then progressively narrows down the scope of the questions until in the end it comes to some very specific points.’ (Oppenheim, 1992, p110)

Although with a focus group it would have been possible to ask more questions, since the same questions would be used in interviews, I decided to limit the number of questions to four. Having written the questions I then tested them to ensure their clarity and suitability. At first I did this informally by asking someone to listen to them and check they could understand them, and then I tested them on a small group of people. This helped me to consider both the order in which I asked the questions and the wording of the questions. I discovered the words ‘church leavers’ could easily be misheard as ‘church leaders’ and so I changed this to ‘those who have left the church’. Through testing the questions with a small group I decided it would be useful for the first two questions to also have a common ‘probe’ that could be asked to draw out a greater response to the question. As Oppenheim states, ‘Sometimes, if the first answer seems a little ambiguous or does not go far enough, we can instruct the interviewer to *probe*.’ (1992, p113) This process was extremely useful and resulted in the following four questions:

Question 1: What does the term ‘Alternative Worship’ mean to you?

Probe: What term would you prefer to use?

Question 2: What does the word ‘mission’ mean to you in your context?

Probe: What term would you prefer to use?

Question 3: In what ways do you see Alternative Worship connecting with the needs of those who have left the church?

Question 4: In what ways do you see Alternative Worship connecting with those who have never been to church?

I took these questions to a focus group of members from the local Alternative Worship community, called Morph. Although this group is diverse enough to have a range of views, I was concerned that some of these views might not be expressed in a group context. There was a danger that certain members of the group might dominate the discussion and that newer members might hold back believing their views to be less valid. To minimise this difficulty, and to get the views of all people in the focus group, I first asked them to write their thoughts for each question on 'Post-it Notes' before starting the discussion. I hoped this would enable a wider range of views to be discussed. To introduce a potentially interesting variable, those who had been in the community for only a short time were given grey 'Post-it Notes', those who had been in the community for more than a year were given pink 'Post-it Notes' and those who had been in the community from the start were given yellow 'Post-it Notes'. It was also the case that those with grey 'Post-it Notes' had the least previous church contact, while those with pink or yellow 'Post-it Notes' had, at some time in the past, all held positions of leadership in a church.

There were eight people in the focus group; two were relatively new members, two had been in the community for over a year and four had been in the community since the beginning. After each question was asked, people were given time to write their initial response on 'Post-it Notes' and stick these to a poster. I read the comments and ensured, as the discussion took place, that all the views expressed on the 'Post-it Notes' had also been expressed in the discussion. However, although some in the group did speak more and could have dominated, everyone was free in expressing their views. It was clear from the discussions that there were a few members who were more comfortable with the worship and ideas of mission of the established church than others, but this had no relation to how long they had been part of the community. In fact, the only significant difference between the responses of the three groups given different coloured 'Post-it Notes' was in their initial response to question three, which will be discussed later as part of that question.

I first looked at the themes coming out from each question in turn and then looked at any overarching themes which emerged from all four questions. In identifying these themes I paid more attention to the extensiveness of the theme rather than simply the frequency with which it occurred. 'Extensiveness is how many different people said something. Frequency is how many times something is said.' (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p136)

Question 1

The three main themes which kept recurring were 'freedom', 'cultural relevance' and 'creative'. Other words which were used quite frequently were: authentic, real, engaging, challenging, involving and exciting. Many people described their experience of worship in traditional churches as 'the hymn sandwich' or 'never-ending chorus session' and being 'rigid'. The feeling was very much that Alternative Worship gave them the freedom to explore, to be creative and worship in a way that was culturally relevant, authentic and real. There was freedom to draw upon a whole variety of ways of worshipping, from loud rock to quiet reflection, and to use what was most helpful at that time. They spoke about freedom to be themselves – free to question, to think, to choose – rather than being told it is wrong to think in a certain way.

In response to the probe, the term 'Alternative Worship' was not thought to be particularly helpful – except for communicating with other similar groups. The objections 'What is it alternative too?' and 'It's about a lot more than worship.' highlighted the difficulties with the term. There was a strong feeling that what Alternative Worship groups are trying to do is more about lifestyle and cultural relevance, and a spiritual experience which resonates with that. The term 'emerging church' was discussed; while some preferred it, others disliked it as much as 'Alternative Worship'. Some thought that groups giving themselves their own name which described something of what they were about – such as 'Visions' or 'Grace' or 'Morph' – was good, while others felt this didn't say anything to those outside the church, or enable groups that had things in common to identify each other.

A strong feeling emerged that in fact they should simply be called 'church' – this is how church should be. The term 'community' was also discussed. The disadvantage

of 'church' was the association people have in their minds when they hear that term – a cold room with hard pews and 'very boring'. The difficulty people saw with the word 'community' was that it said nothing about God. The focus group did not really reach a consensus on this issue – except perhaps for an acknowledgement that they didn't like labels, and language can be difficult because of the meaning certain words can have for different people. The closest the group came to agreeing an appropriate term was 'Christian community'.

Question 2

Three quarters of the group started their 'Post-it Note' comments with what 'mission' is not: the negative associations they have with that word from their experiences of traditional churches. The group had strong views that it was not about 'Bible bashing', shouting at people on street corners, missionaries going off overseas telling people they are wrong, or just about conversion – getting people to say the 'believers' prayer' and increasing the numbers of people in the church. Particularly it was felt that mission wasn't about helping people in poverty as a first step towards conversion, but they should be helped because they are people and should be treated as such.

Some people also felt the word implies something extra that you have to go and do, rather than something that is part of your life. Some people in the group did want to place some importance on converting people. A view was expressed that mission was something that Morph did not do very well, as it lacked coherence in its approach to mission. Others disagreed, and in their view of 'mission' this was something that Morph did do very well, and that it was an important part of Morph not to be coherent, but to be free-flowing.

There was a more general agreement that mission is about lifestyle, and an important part of that is the way we create community – being real and authentic in our relationships with each other, and with people in the wider world. There was also strong agreement that although there is a spiritual aspect to mission that it had to be practical: living the beatitudes, reaching out to the downtrodden, transforming the whole of life – poverty, loneliness, hunger. It should be about a 'God directed' life, being Christ for the people we meet each day and showing love.

There was also a strong sense of having a mission to those in the established church who feel they don't belong – those who are struggling with questions and experiences that can't be managed in church – and to provide a 'realistic' view of faith for a generation who may be disillusioned with 'straight-jacketed' faith.

As the discussion progressed and people struggled with both the negative and positive aspects of mission and how that related to Morph as a community, one person in the group introduced the idea of understanding 'mission' in terms of a 'mission statement'. This was the way in which she met and understood the word 'mission' in her work context. This changed the discussion to look at mission in terms of purpose or reason for being.

The group had a strong sense that Morph's reason for being was to be there for people; both those who are running out of the backdoor of the church and for those who would never come in the front door. It was about being real and authentic in our relationship with God and with other people, and about being there for the poor and oppressed. This idea of mission resonated with the group, who now all agreed that this was something Morph did do well. They felt the community offers a lot to people who are struggling and has a mission to 'those who don't fit in'.

Another aspect of mission the group spoke about was that of 'having a story to tell', and how people's involvement in Morph has given them a story they want to tell. Their previous experiences of church meant they never wanted to rush out and talk to others about what the church was doing, and invite people to come along. However, now when they are in conversation with work colleagues, friends or neighbours they find it easy to talk to them about Morph, because they are actually excited about what God is doing in this community.

Following these definitions of mission as 'mission statement' and 'having a story to tell' it was irrelevant to ask the probe.

Question 3

In the discussion everyone made some comment about why people leave the church. However, those who had been in the community since the beginning made very few

references to this and focused mostly on the things they felt Alternative Worship offered to church leavers. The other two groups, particularly in their initial responses, focused much more on the reasons why people leave the established church. The main reasons cited for people leaving the church were: people don't feel involved; church is irrelevant and has nothing to offer them; boredom; things are forced on them by church leaders – they are told what to believe; inflexible, out-of-date services following a set format; doesn't fit with the world around them; impersonal; cold and uncomfortable building; misses the point of the rest of my life; wounded by church; and don't find God in church.

The main themes which emerged from the discussion about what Alternative Worship has to offer were: freedom; not feeling judged; to be involved in creating worship; the intimacy of the group; cultural relevance; space to explore faith; an acceptance that beliefs can change over time; socially conscious; spiritual experience; space to recover from being burnt-out, wounded, or whatever has happened; worship which involves all senses; being involved in active worship; and in-depth debate.

Question 4

The initial responses to this question consisted of the reasons the group felt Alternative Worship would meet the needs of the non-churched. One of the core elements was thought to be that it is coming from within post-modern culture, rather than from outside it. Consequently the things it talks about are those which are important or relevant to people who are part of that culture. It uses things people are already aware of, and encourages them to look at them in a different way in order to discover spiritual meaning from them. The group felt Alternative Worship was more stimulating, exciting and spiritual than traditional church services, and that they try to be honest about uncertainty in a world which is very uncertain. The comment was then made that some people are actually looking for certainty, and it was felt that Alternative Worship is unable to meet that need in people. Such people usually turn to Fundamentalist groups. Alternative Worship is relevant to people who 'have a similar cultural experience and outlook to us'. Some of the group used the term 'Generation X' to describe themselves and this common cultural experience shared by the group.

Another aspect that the group considered would be attractive to the non-churched, was that the group is a supportive community, which accepts people as they are. This creates a safe, non-threatening place for people to ask questions and build friendships without fear of being judged, told they are wrong, or converted. It enables people to explore their own faith and spirituality. An important part of building relationships within the community is about people telling their stories and having time to listen to another's story.

However, having spoken initially about why the group felt that Alternative Worship could be attractive to the non-churched, it then acknowledged that in fact Morph, like many other Alternative Worship groups, mostly attracts church leavers rather than the non-churched. One reason given for this was that most Alternative Worship groups were started by church leavers. People also thought it was much harder for people with no church background to discover Alternative Worship groups, because they don't meet in a marked building on a Sunday morning. People's ideas of what church is like – a building, a boring service, dull, irrelevant – means they don't look. It was also felt that even if the non-churched did come, they would find Alternative Worship as confusing as traditional services.

Summary

The word which jumped out from this focus group was 'freedom'. In Alternative Worship this group of people have found a freedom of worship, faith and spirituality that they did not find in church. This freedom is extremely important and the fluidity is very striking. This was highlighted by comments such as: '[In Morph] I won't be held to my 'views' forever.'

The other important theme was active participation and creativity in worship; being involved and bringing our culture to the worship. Mission was seen in terms of 'telling my story', living authentically and social action. Finally, having a sense of belonging and building community was also considered vitally important.

Chapter 4: Interviews with representatives from Alternative Worship communities from all over the country

Following on from the focus group, the intention was to take the same questions to a National Gathering. At this conference I planned to interview people from Alternative Worship communities from around the country in order to gain data to make a comparison with the local community, and enable me to judge in what ways the views of the local community are typical of or different from other communities. However, this conference was cancelled by the organisers. I then considered various methods by which I could obtain the same kind of information. Ideally I would like to have visited a number of different Alternative Worship communities located in different contexts and geographical areas and set up a focus group with each one – this would have provided the best data and the best comparison with the focus group held locally. However this was not possible within the timescale and resources of this project, as Krueger and Casey state ‘Often, planning is a balancing act between what would be nice to do and what is doable with the resources at hand.’ (2000, p28)

Therefore I considered two options, one was to set up an email focus group and the other was to conduct interviews by phone. The main advantage of the former method would be the interaction between the people involved. In practice though, it would be difficult to arrange for people to be available at the same time if the group was set up through instant messaging, or waiting for people to reply if it was done over a period of time. The main advantage of the latter method would be the ability to probe and re-phrase questions. Reflecting on my experiences of the focus group I felt the advantages of being able to probe through interviewing outweighed the advantages of the interaction which might have taken place in an email focus group.

I emailed members of a number of groups spread across England to ask if they, or another member of their community, would be prepared to be interviewed. I had five positive responses. Two of these groups were from London, one from Bath, one from Manchester and one from York. I conducted an interview by phone with a representative from each of these groups, using the same questions I had used with the focus group. This chapter looks at the themes coming out from each question in turn, and then looks at any overarching themes which emerge from all four questions.

Question 1

Two of the respondents began by mentioning the history of the term 'Alternative Worship' starting with the Sheffield 'Nine o'clock service' and the 'Late Late Service' in Glasgow. However, all of the respondents spoke about what it meant to them. The main themes which emerged from this were: participative worship; creative worship; more holistic; worship with all of your senses, not just singing; the use of contemporary culture – music, art, visuals, photography, video, multimedia; mix of the ancient and modern; free to explore, not set by any particular agenda; culturally and socially informed. The participation of people in the creation as well as the event of worship was mentioned, as well as a comment about the style of leadership for this worship – i.e. shared leadership rather than top down by the 'expert' worship leader.

Some respondents used the word 'alternative' to say that the worship was alternative to what mainstream churches offer. However, the point was also made that worship happening in churches on a Sunday morning is 'alternative' because it is alternative to what most people experience. There was a strong feeling expressed by all respondents concerning 'not leaving your culture at home when you come to church'.

The response to the probe was mixed. One respondent said their group had talked around the term quite a lot and were comfortable with it to the extent that they knew what it meant to them, and that other similar groups, and the Church of England, understood and used the term. Other respondents thought the term was unhelpful and would prefer another term, although most had not decided on an alternative. One respondent suggested that just 'worship' might be preferable. The terms 'emerging church' and 'fresh expressions' were thought to be better as they were more holistic. One group uses the term 'creative worship' interchangeably with 'Alternative Worship'.

Question 2

Three of the five respondents started by saying what mission is not: mission weeks, mission strategies, preaching, using culturally inappropriate methods to convert people, standing on the street evangelising and shouting at people. Three of the respondents also spoke of how this was something their community had been talking about recently.

All of the respondents expressed an incarnational understanding of mission – to join in with the activity of God in His world. God was referred to as a missionary God who was active in contemporary culture. Social action was seen as an integral part of that – siding with the poor, looking after the planet, visiting people in hospital and prison, and getting involved in justice issues, community and charity work. It is about bringing the Kingdom of God, reflecting God’s values and showing people what heaven is like: encouraging them to look beyond the everyday, to look for the holy or divine around them, and to look towards God. Some of the respondents gave specific examples of ways in which they did this, including doing visuals for nightclubs, art exhibitions, having a stand at a Mind, Body and Spirit exhibition, and taking a labyrinth into a young offenders’ prison.

In response to the probe the respondents talked more about reclaiming the term ‘mission’ and broadening the understanding of ‘conversion’, rather than wanting to use any other term. Although there were some negative associations with the term mission, the respondents had a strong sense of the mission of God, and getting involved with that.

Question 3

Most of the respondents referred to the fact that the majority of people who started Alternative Worship groups, or indeed were involved with them now, were church leavers. One comment which expressed this point strongly was, ‘[Alternative Worship groups] were not so much about mission but more of a survival thing – I need something I can relate to or I’m going to leave the church’. Another group commented ‘We are much more about providing for de-churched people.’ Both of these respondents spoke of the importance of affirming and valuing those who have left the church, ‘Many people are quite negative about that group, but I think they are an important group. Mission to that group is as important as to those outside.’

Some of the respondents gave reasons for people leaving the church: feeling marginalized or frustrated; being constricted by a particular way of thinking; dissatisfied; too many expectations; feeling battered and jaded; not finding what they were looking for.

Contrasting this with Alternative Worship, all of the respondents spoke about giving people the space and freedom to work things out for themselves, to find who they are in worship, to explore, to be themselves, to say what they think without fear of being frowned upon, and to feel accepted. One respondent also spoke about Alternative Worship allowing people to be angry with God, to get upset with God and to grieve, which they had not felt able to do in church. Many respondents spoke of Alternative Worship attracting those who had given up on the church, but not on God. Some respondents also mentioned the creativity and participative nature of the worship, the sense of mystery and space to reflect and explore.

Question 4

All respondents commented that they have more church leavers than those who have never been to church, and in fact they had very few people with no previous church background. One respondent made the comment that if people with no church background come to their worship services they can get 'weirded out' because they have an idea of what church is like in their minds and it doesn't conform to their expectations. Another respondent reflected on the difficulty of letting people know that they are there. However, the general feeling was that Alternative Worship, although it is not one hundred percent accessible to the non-churched, should be more accessible because it uses the language, visuals and music of the everyday.

Alternative Worship is more culturally relevant because it is participative and encourages people to explore what faith might mean to them. It has the potential to be more attractive because it is not dogmatic and it is more experiential. Some of the respondents spoke about some of the ways they are getting involved in the community through nightclubs, cafés, art exhibitions and setting up a labyrinth in different places. The respondents felt some of these things, such as the labyrinth, gave people space to reflect on their own lives and start to investigate spiritual things. However, most of the activities were just about positive personal contact with others, enabling them to discover that these 'Christians' care about the same things as them, which might change their attitudes towards Christians or the church.

Summary

The key themes in terms of 'worship' were participation, creativity, holistic and cultural relevance. The respondents clearly had an incarnational understanding of mission – believing that God was present in contemporary culture – and placed an emphasis on social action. The respondents all thought that Alternative Worship had all the right elements to be more accessible and attractive to the non-churched, and yet they mostly connected with church leavers. There was a strong feeling that church leavers were a group which needed to be affirmed, and mission to this group was important.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter discusses the common themes and differences between the literature, the focus group and the interviews.

There was a huge commonality between the literature written by those involved in Alternative Worship, or by people whose main source was interviews with those involved, the responses of the focus group and those who were interviewed. I found the extent of the similarities and lack of significant differences very interesting and surprising. However, many of the books written about Alternative Worship used the same communities I interviewed as examples, and some include quotes from the people I interviewed. Gibbs and Bolger quote extensively from four out of the five groups I interviewed, and in particular they quote frequently from two of the people I interviewed. This would explain some of the similarity between the themes emerging from these books and those which emerged from my interviews. The respondents I interviewed were mostly 'leaders' of the communities, or certainly those who had been very involved and active within the community for a long time. From their responses it was clear they had read books on Alternative Worship and were in communication with other communities. This again could explain some of the commonality in the responses.

However, the same could not be said for all of those who took part in the focus group. Those who have been part of the community from the beginning have read books, listened to speakers and talked with people from other Alternative Worship

communities, but this is not true of the others in the focus group. This was the reason for giving members of the focus group different coloured 'Post-it Notes'. However, as was noted in Chapter 3, there was no significant difference between the responses of the three groups differentiated by the colour of 'Post-it Notes'. The only exception being in the initial response to Question 3 in which the members of the focus group who had been part of Morph from the beginning spoke mostly about what Alternative Worship had to offer church leavers, whereas newer members initially gave reasons why people didn't like church. Dawn comments on this, writing that in her experience 'people very rapidly get bored with talking about what they don't like about where they came from. They are far more interested in working out how to express their Christian faith in a way that is authentic to them.' (Cray et al, 1997, p50)

In order to discover the reason for the similarities in the responses it might be more helpful to start by looking at the common cultural experience of the people in the communities rather than at Alternative Worship itself. All of the communities consisted mostly of church leavers, and although they are not restricted by age, they are predominantly started by people in the 'Baby Buster' generation, or sometimes the 'Baby Boomer' generation. In Chapter 2, the reasons stated by Richter and Francis for people in these generations leaving the church were quoted (1998, pp49-50, 148). Alternative Worship communities could be viewed as a response to those reasons for leaving. They leave because of 'their suspicion of easy answers' – 'emerging church leaders make no claim to have all the answers.' (Gibbs and Bolger, 2006, pp170-171) They leave because of 'their unwillingness to be passive consumers' – in Alternative Worship there is a commitment to real participation. They leave because of 'their hunger to have all their senses satisfied' – Alternative Worship seeks to engage the whole person – body and senses. They leave because of their 'desire to 'be their own person', in their own style' – Alternative Worship provides opportunities for a variety of responses and uses contemporary culture to resource the worship. They leave because they find the church 'lacking authenticity and credibility' – Alternative Worship places a high value on authenticity through participation and cultural relevance. They leave because 'they sense that their values and lifestyle are not welcome at church' – Alternative Worship seeks to create a community of openness and hospitality where everyone feels accepted and valued. They leave because 'they look in vain for their church to be genuinely concerned for wider social and global

issues’ – ‘Alterative worship services address issues such as poverty, sexuality, racism, and the environment. In some services, justice and environmental issues are integral.’ (Gibbs and Bolger, 2006, p149)

There are significant differences between some of the literature and the responses of the focus group and interviews. The most striking difference is found in the view of mission. As discussed in Chapter 2, Moynagh and others express the view that mission is not high on the agenda of Alternative Worship groups. The Mission-shaped Church report states, ‘Alt.worship groups can be criticized for lack of any ongoing engagement with mission – either social involvement or evangelism.’ (2004, p45) In the light of this it is interesting to note that the central question for this dissertation came from discussions Morph was having about its mission, and that three out of the five people interviewed said that mission was something their community had been talking about recently. However, the responses from the focus group and interviews would agree with Moynagh’s assertion, ‘Some groups are uncomfortable with blatant evangelism, seeing it as too directive and narrow.’ (2004, p23) Alternative worship is committed to contextualizing the gospel and expresses an incarnational view of mission. Authors writing from an evangelical traditional church background express mission in terms of evangelism, conversion and increasing the number of people in the churches. ‘Alternative worship groups [thus] tend to evaluate the success of their services on the quality of religious experience that it made possible for participants, rather than the quantity of people who participated in the ritual.’ (Lynch, 2002, p49) Some books comment that traditional churches may be less than enthusiastic about Alternative Worship because it does not encourage people back to Sunday worship.

Another significant difference comes in the views of leadership. Many of the fresh expressions written about retain traditional models of leadership. Alternative Worship, if it talks about leadership at all, does so in terms of facilitator and servant – someone who can resource rather than direct the community and its worship. It also speaks of a leader as one recognized and encouraged in that role by the community, rather than someone appointed to the community from outside. Baker, Gay and Brown write about liturgy as the ‘work of the people’. In this, ‘There are no recognized experts or professionals directing the process. It helps if a group has some people who have knowledge/theological capital, who know something of the resources and treasures to

be found in the tradition, but it helps more if they don't offer them as 'the expert'. Theirs is just one of the many gifts brought to the group. Other people will bring different skills and talents.' (2003, p71)

Alternative Worship communities are predominantly started and filled with church leavers. Kirkpatrick, Pierson and Riddell assert, 'The church accepts no responsibility for the increasing tide of disaffection, but rather wants to call into question the integrity of those who have been alienated.' (2000, p11) However, if as Richter and Francis state, 1,500 people leave the church each week, and as Mission-shaped Church reports, 40% of the population are 'de-churched', then mission to this group of people is of huge importance. Although Moynagh focuses his book predominately on new forms of church which reach out to the non-churched, he does acknowledge that 'we need to remember that these new forms can also help to prevent existing churchgoers from leaving. That, too, is part of the church's mission.' (2004, p19) Two of the people interviewed commented that church leavers were a group which need to be affirmed. I think that this is a message that the church needs to listen to if it is not to alienate church leavers further.

Alternative Worship communities believe that they should be more attractive to the non-churched than traditional churches. The main reasons given for this are their commitment to contextualize the gospel and make it relevant to contemporary culture, and the use of culture in their worship. Much of the music and visuals used in worship would be familiar to non-churched people. The emphasis on participation, metaphor, story, symbol, spirituality, the environment and the involvement of the whole person relate to the contemporary search for spirituality outside of the church. Why Alternative Worship communities are attracting so few non-churched people appears to be something of a mystery and is a question that would be valuable to research further.

Some of the literature spoke of the church singing songs of celebration as an act of denial when they should be mourning. 'People who come to church carrying negative emotions or problems can feel alienated or excluded by a constant diet of upbeat joyful worship music. They also need music and words that enable them to articulate their pain to God.' (Baker, Gay and Brown, 2003, p72) Respondents in the focus

groups and interviews describe the churches as having ‘never-ending chorus sessions’ and being unable to deal with doubts and questions. This is cited as one of the reasons people leave the church. ‘If people cannot speak openly in church and ask their questions, express their doubts, tell their stories – they will go elsewhere to find authentic community and support.’ (Jamieson, 2004, p45) In contrast, they speak of Alternative Worship creating a safe space to express hurt, doubt, anger and disappointment. A theme which comes out time and again in relation to Alternative Worship is that of integrity. To worship with integrity is to not deny the pain and uncertainty of life, but to bring that to our worship along with our celebration and joy.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this chapter the central question for the research is returned to:

In what ways can Alternative Worship communities engage with the spiritual needs of both church leavers and non-churched seekers?

In many ways I think the answer that has emerged is the same for both, and a key factor is the contextualization of the gospel in each generation. At the same time it has been clearly acknowledged that Alternative Worship is connecting mostly with church leavers, and although there is a belief that it should be more accessible to the non-churched than traditional churches, it is attracting very few non-churched people.

In Chapter 5 I noted that this question – why are Alternative Worship communities attracting so few non-churched people? – would be a valuable question for further research.

Alternative worship communities – with their strongly incarnational theology – bring the things of everyday culture to worship, creating something which is authentic and relevant to those involved. It has many cultural similarities to the ‘New Age’ movement and the contemporary search for spiritual meaning. It seeks to destroy the secular/sacred split and engage the whole person and the whole of life in worship. It places an emphasis on building open and accepting communities where stories can be told and respected. In all of these ways – and the many others already mentioned – Alternative Worship communities can meet the spiritual needs of church leavers and

the non-churched in contemporary society. A further question for research could be – are the non-churched finding spiritual fulfilment through the New Age or other contemporary spiritualities? If it is found that they are then the church would do well to look at the reasons why this is – in what ways are these forms of spirituality connecting with people? If it is found that people who try different forms of spirituality outside of the church are still searching and have an unanswered spiritual longing, then perhaps the question to explore is – how can the church reach into the unfulfilment of their spiritual longing in an enlightening way?

However, ‘Mainstream Evangelicalism [therefore] appears to be continuing to flourish despite the obvious discontinuities in its ideology and practice with a ‘Generation X’ view of the world. By contrast, the alternative worship movement in Britain is a relatively small and underground network.’ (Lynch, 2002, pp48-49) Lings describes Alternative Worship as ‘a small fragile animal’ (2001, p3) and Mission-shaped Church states, ‘so far its communities do not seem to have demonstrated long-term stability. It is a cause of major celebration when an alt.worship community lasts ten years.’ (2004, p45) Alternative Worship communities are small and do not see huge growth in numbers, and in particular they are not attracting significant numbers of non-churched people. Lynch also states, ‘When the reluctance of ‘post-evangelicals’ and those involved in ‘alternative worship’ to convert others to their beliefs is acknowledged, it is clearly open to question as to how significant or influential ‘post-evangelicalism’ and ‘alternative worship’ will be in the development of Christianity in the coming decades.’ (2002, p50)

I think the question of what attracts people with ‘Generation X’ cultural experiences to Mainstream Evangelicalism might be interesting to explore. However, in one sense this is irrelevant, because Alternative Worship is not seeking to replace other forms of church, but exists for those who do not relate to them. It has been noted that those who set up Alternative Worship were not trying to start a new church. ‘In reality, it’s simply a group of people who have been experimenting with doing new things, rather than giving up on church altogether. As Charlie Irvine has said, we’ve done it as a matter of survival. We’re not trying to prove a point to anyone, or to compete with more traditional patterns of worship. We’re just trying to function as people following Christ.’ (Kirkpatrick, Pierson and Riddell, 2000, p14)

In the literature, focus groups and interviews there has been no assertion that Alternative Worship *is* the shape of the church in the future. However, this does not mean that it will not be significant or influential on the future of Christianity and the shape of the church. In the same way that smaller political parties or lobby groups never expect to become the party in power does not mean that they have no influence over the policies which shape our country, it may be that Alternative Worship has a similar role.

Roberts states, 'Alternative worship has an enormous contribution to make to the church's mission as our society is progressively affected by the cultural changes that are currently most acutely affecting the younger half of the population.' (1999, p4) Alternative Worship's commitment to contextualizing the gospel is something which can benefit the whole church. 'If we want to engage with it [the spirituality of people outside the Church] effectively and prophetically, we have to leave our safe havens and risk the challenges to our comfortable faith.' (Avis, 2003, p90) Perhaps Alternative Worship can lead the way in this. Riddell writes, 'The church in the West is in the early stages of a massive reformation. Out on the frontiers there are pioneers of the faith, already engaging with the emerging culture. They are learning as they go, responding to new questions and experiences. The reports they send back from the front lines are vital to the reshaping of the tradition. These are the scouts and trailblazers who will make a way for us, some at the cost of their own lives or ministries.' (1998, p173)

Already there are signs that those in traditional churches have gained insights from Alternative Worship, including more participation in their services, or drawing on both the ancient and modern to resource worship. As Dawn comments, 'At the heart of 'alternative' worship, then, is something which should not be side-lined as a 'special' activity. The principles of it could easily be incorporated into ordinary, everyday services.' (Cray et al, 1997, p50) These must not be efforts to make our services 'trendy', but a real commitment to engage with culture, that the timeless relevance of the gospel does not become lost in the medium we use to express it, which is becoming increasingly irrelevant.

Brewin asserts, 'alternative worship will be seen in the future to have been part of the preparation of the ground for the new to emerge from, rather than the newness itself.' (2004, p70) He goes on to write, 'I believe their primary function will be simply to clear the ground and give permission to the wider Church to imagine new things.' (2004, p72) Tomlinson ends his book by quoting from the German ecologist Rudolph Bahro: 'When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure.' (1995, p145) Alternative Worship might be a 'small fragile animal', it might be taking faltering, uncertain steps into the future, but I believe that many involved are those who are not afraid to be insecure – those who have the courage to risk collapse and failure in order to live the Christian faith in a way that is authentic to them. Perhaps they are the pioneers who will show the way for the church, through their failures as well as their successes.

No one knows the future shape of the church, but for all who dare to dream that it has a future, they must seek ways of communicating the gospel within their culture in a vital and relevant way. Alternative Worship, and other models of emerging church, may not be the future, but they may help to shape the future as they seek to contextualize the gospel, and enable people to live the Christian life in an authentic way amongst their own generation.

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