

**Missional or Misguided?
Exploring the Ecclesiology
of New Zealand Baptist Churches
Without Church Buildings**

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ABSTRACT

From their earliest beginnings in 17th century England, Baptists have been committed to radical expressions of discipleship and have engaged in mission in innovative ways. The local church was envisaged as a group of believers who had made a binding covenant to God and to one another. Together they were the visible witness of the kingdom of God in the world. Within this traditional Baptist ecclesiology, church buildings were used for mission initiatives in the local community. This has been the traditional paradigm in the New Zealand context, but in the last thirty years several Baptist churches have chosen to function without their own designated church buildings. This research project makes a case study of four Baptist churches that had chosen to exist without their own buildings and explores the proposition that the choice to depart from the prevailing paradigm represented a deeper and more zealous commitment to mission. The project first explores the development of a Baptist ecclesiology in the New Zealand context to develop a frame of reference. Seven church leaders were interviewed and their experiences and values were evaluated against an historic Baptist ecclesiology. There were significant differences in the interviewees understanding of their role in God's mission and the place of the local church. There were also significant differences in the way that each church made decisions. These differences demonstrated a departure from an historic Baptist ecclesiology and the choice to function without church buildings had not necessarily resulted in these churches adopting a more missional or more radical stance. Effective mission and vital witness may be achieved without church buildings, but only when there is a will to engage strategically and theologically with issues of Baptist identity and calling.

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Introduction

Church buildings can be beautiful creations that express in wood, stone, and glass the theology of the people who gather there to worship God. Church buildings can be constructed to express the mystery and glory of God's presence in the world and as an aid to humanity's worship. Church buildings can become local landmarks, marking a place and a space in time that signifies the presence of God and God's people in the world. Church buildings can be seven-days-a-week hubs of all manner of ministry, places of hospitality and bases for societal engagement. Church buildings provide a visible and enduring sign of the church's commitment to a place and its people.

To some church communities, the church buildings are sacred, and some places in the building must be treated with special respect as holy and set apart for God. The responsibility to care for, and maintain church buildings is shared. Buildings are held in trust by each generation. They are not private places, and yet within church buildings, important and life-changing Christian rites of passage are marked: baptisms, weddings, funerals, commissioning for service, dedications, and more.

Although the Church is people, we are social beings anchored in geography, and a sense of *place* is significant. As someone who has lived in Christchurch since 2007, I have experienced the effect of significant earthquakes and aftershocks. Many important buildings have been destroyed, including many churches. The loss of these important places, these buildings, is a source of grief to many people. Successive generations have shared life in these places; buildings connect people together and give witness to our history and identity. Church leaders have been quick to point out that the church is *a people* in a place, but few Cantabrians would deny the impact of a changing cityscape, the absence of beautiful architecture, and the difficulty we experience finding our way around without familiar buildings to guide us.

Even before the earthquakes began I had started to wonder about the seeming invisibility of the Baptist church where I was employed. The church met in a school hall on Sunday morning, and like the other churches represented in this research, it effectively disappeared after the worship gathering is over. I observed that the lack of an enduring home base limited the extent to which hospitality could be expressed

and it seemed to explain why this church did not engage in any form of community focused outreach. I wondered how this sat within Baptist ecclesiology. I wondered whether buildings, or the lack of them, might shape and limit a church's identity, a suggestion that strikes at the heart of some idealists who consider church-owned buildings to be unnecessary and a waste of resources. Up until this time I had assumed that churches that were opting out of the more traditional paradigm were committed to more radical expressions of discipleship and to engaging in mission in innovative ways. I had heard some church members express their frustration with the fact that a lot of financial resource and human energy was tied up with owning and maintaining church buildings. They seemed to assume that if a church was free from this responsibility then resources would be released and channeled in to mission. I questioned whether church buildings were absorbing resources at the expense of mission because it seemed to me that church buildings provided a base for all kinds of missional activity, but I was interested to learn more about the new ways being church that were evolving out of these kinds of convictions.

I noticed a prevalent assumption that the buildings in which the church gathers are neutral, passive, spaces that could be adapted to the church's purpose, and I wondered if that were true. That was not my experience. The school hall where I worshipped had walls that were adorned with school notices and student's projects and contained large pieces of gym equipment. This was not a neutral atmosphere. Children seemed to find the environment stimulating and energising. I started to wrestle with questions of what it meant to be church and in particular a Baptist church in this context. I wondered if churches that had departed from the traditional church paradigm and had chosen to exist without their own buildings really did represent a deeper and more zealous commitment to mission.

In what seemed to be a counter-cultural phenomenon, several new Baptist churches that emerged in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s determined that they would remain free from property ownership rather than follow more traditional models of church planting. This research project will make a case study of four of these churches. It will explore the thinking of church leaders with a view to understanding the theological rationale for that choice. How do these church leaders understand the Mission of God and their part in it? Does their vision for the church sit within a baptistic vision with particular regard to local mission and evangelism? And how has

the experience of being almost invisible in the local community affected the church? Does it mean that Baptist churches that have chosen to function without buildings have reframed the Baptist ideals of mission and evangelism around the needs of their members? What do those who lead these churches think the church is for? It is my thesis that these churches have embraced a historic Baptist ecclesiology and have recovered the radical edge that once characterised the Baptist movement.

This project is divided into two parts. Part One is a theological exploration of Baptist ecclesiology in the New Zealand experience. Part Two makes a case study of four New Zealand Baptist churches that functioned without designated church buildings and evaluates the experiences and values these churches embody in light of the Baptist ecclesiology described in Part One.

Part One

Chapter 1

Historical Influences on Leadership and Church Life

New Zealand Baptists are not defined by creeds, defended doctrines or organisational structures. The denomination is only loosely held together, and each congregation functions autonomously. The advantage of such a spacious form is that Baptists are able to evolve and respond to the changing environment. The risk is that without a clear sense of who they are and where they have come from, Baptists will, or already have, passively relinquished their distinctive identity. Baptist theologian James McClendon observes that Baptists have not been very good at clearly articulating their distinctive vision and have produced little formal theology.¹ He wrote:

The baptists in all their variety and disunity *failed to see in their own heritage, their own way of using Scripture, their own communal practices, their own guiding vision*, a resource for theology unlike the prevailing tendencies around them....Yet the underlying failure was baptists' distrust of their own vision, their common life, their very gospel; whereas that vision might have been the resource for their theology, and theology in turn the means of exploring that gospel, revitalizing that life, focusing that vision. Failing in this way, baptists became the victim of ideologies left and right – and thereby became less themselves, spiritually impoverishing both themselves and their neighbors in other Christian churches.² (Italics in original)

McClendon wrote a celebrated three-volume work of systematic theology that provides a more complete definition of the Baptist vision. Other Baptist scholars writing today, such as Paul Fiddes, Steven Holmes, Nigel Wright, and Martin Sutherland, are all confident that there *is* a Baptist theology; a baptistic vision that centers on the church, and a way of being church. Martin Sutherland proposes that:

¹ James Wm. McClendon, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Ethics. Revised Edition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 20.

² *Ibid.*, 26. Note that McClendon prefers to use lowercase 'b' for baptist to reflect the breadth of Christian theology and traditions that are accepted by believer's churches that do not necessarily identify as Baptist and yet hold to the baptistic vision he describes.

We must recognize that the beating heart of Baptist theology is ecclesiology. Not, it must be stressed, a general attention to the nature of the Church, but a particular 'baptistic' understanding of the dynamics of the community of Christ. Underlying traditional Baptist distinctives is an understanding of the dynamics of being church, or better, the dynamics of *becoming* church.³

Sutherland goes on to explain that two 'Church Life Surveys' in recent years reveal that Baptists are not clear about their denomination's identity, but what attracts them to their local church community is worship.⁴ There is a high level of appreciation of music and singing as means by which the congregation encounters Christ.⁵ The weakened sense of identity among Baptists can be attributed in part to the large number of people from other denominations that have joined Baptist churches from the 1960's onwards.⁶ Significant shifts within the New Zealand Presbyterian, Methodist, and Brethren churches led many to leave church or cross to other denominations.⁷ Those transferring to Baptist churches brought with them different understandings about church government and the source of power and authority.⁸ Added to this, the charismatic renewal of the 1970s and 1980s was a significant influence on Baptist churches and this movement tended to emphasize the 'eldership approach' to church governance and leadership.⁹ In the absence of a clearly

³ Martin Sutherland, *Radical Disciples: Reflections on being Baptist* (Auckland: South Bay Press, 2011), 12-13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Laurie Guy and Martin Sutherland, "Leadership: The New Zealand Experience since the 1960's," in *Leadership and Baptist Church Governance*, ed. Graeme Chatfield (Eastwood: Morling Press, 2005), 136. The authors write from a Baptist perspective but it is apparent that since the 1960's there has been a significant movement across all denominational boundaries as church goers choose where they will worship for reasons that go beyond denominational loyalty.

⁷ According to James Veitch, attendance at New Zealand Presbyterian churches dropped from 119,041 in 1960 to 55,062 in 1988. It is noteworthy that the Lloyd Geering heresy trial was in 1967, from which he was acquitted. Geering's denial of the resurrection and other key tenants of the historical Christian faith reflected a sense of increasing Presbyterian liberalism which led many conservative Presbyterians to leave the church at that time. See James Veitch, "1961-1990: Towards the Church for a New Era" in *Presbyterians in Aotearoa 1840-1990*, ed. Dennis McEldowney (Wellington, Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, 1990), 151.

⁸ Guy and Sutherland, *Leadership and Baptist Church Governance*, 137.

⁹ According to Bruce Patrick in 1989 there were 200 Baptist churches and 138 identified as having a charismatic theological orientation. See Bruce Patrick, "Growing Churches: Growing, Growing, Gone" in *Meet the Baptists: Postwar Personalities and Perspectives*, ed. Elaine E. Bolitho (Auckland: Christian Research Association of New Zealand, 1993), 111.

articulated vision and theology many present day Baptists seem fuzzy about matters of Baptist identity.

The Congregation Under Christ's Leadership

A Trinitarian perspective on the Church recognises that the congregation is gathered and led by Christ to worship the Father in the power of the Spirit. Christ is the undisputed head of the church, and the congregation exists under his rule. As people caught up in the life of the triune God, the church exists *in* and *for* the Trinity. The church community are drawn together by the Spirit, and through Christ participate in the worship of the Father. It is therefore reasonable to expect that the church will reflect the love, unity and mutuality that characterise the relationships within community of the Trinity. Nigel Wright points out that a hierarchical view of the Trinity, where the Spirit is envisaged as subordinate to the Son who is subordinate to the Father, inevitably leads to a hierarchical ordering of the church. By contrast those who recognise that the Trinity exists as a community of co-equal persons who enjoy mutual, inter-penetrative loving, and self-donation (perichoresis) will order their churches in ways that prioritise power-sharing, fellowship and reciprocity.¹⁰ The historical Baptists emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and on power-sharing is consistent with recognition of the non-hierarchical ontology within the Trinity.¹¹ This understanding of Trinitarian relating provides a theological foundation for the ongoing process of ordering the local church in keeping with a distinctive Baptist vision, but as Stephen Holmes points out, Baptist theologians can be found on every side of discussions concerning relational Trinitarianism.¹² Ironically, the obvious lack of consensus on important doctrines such as this may serve as evidence of the success of the Baptist way of doing theology which regards the local congregation, rather than the academy, as the only legitimate context in which the interpretation of Scripture takes place.¹³ That being so, Baptists have something valuable to offer; there are elements of the historic Baptist ecclesiology that are worth preserving and celebrating. To ensure Baptist ecclesiology continues to evolve it is important that

¹⁰ Nigel Wright, *Free Church Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (London: Paternoster, 2005), 5-6.

¹¹ See also Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), particularly chapters 5 and 6.

¹² Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 71.

¹³ This underlines Sutherland's point that theology is derived from the shared life of believers in their local congregation.

present day Baptists are aware of their heritage and have a theological grounding for the decisions they make about their shared life and future.

The conviction that Christ's dominion is expressed through the whole congregation is part of this heritage, and was promoted by the first English separatists, the forebears of New Zealand Baptists. In early 17th century England John Smyth drew his definition of the church from Matthew 18:20, and as one breaking free from Anglicanism he was convinced that even when as few as two or three of Christ's true disciples were intentionally gathered in Christ's name, without the presence of ordained clergy, a church existed. He wrote,

We say the Church or two or three faithful people Seperated fro the world & joyned together in a true covenant, have both Christ, the covenant, & promises, & the ministerial powre of Christ given to them, & that they are the body that recaeve from Christs hand out of heaven.[sic]¹⁴

Members of the church made a binding commitment to Christ and to one another, and significantly, Smyth also asserted that the visible church was the locus of Christ's kingdom.¹⁵ Miroslav Volf has observed that these convictions have shaped the entire Free Church tradition.¹⁶ That being so, it will be important to consider how these convictions are understood and applied today by those who lead the four Baptist churches that are the subject of this research. What makes a church a church? And what is the significance of Smyth's conviction that the kingdom of God is revealed in the visible church for churches that only gather for a few hours each week?

In 1606 or 1607 a congregation of the first English Separatists made a public covenant with God and with each other, to walk in God's ways as they were made known among them, according to their best endeavors, whatever the cost, and with

¹⁴ John Smyth, *The Works of John Smyth*, ed. W. T. Whitley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 403.

¹⁵ See for example Smyth, *The Works of John Smyth*, 252, but this is a subject he frequently returns to.

¹⁶ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 135.

God's help.¹⁷ From this point on Baptists can trace their history. John Smyth and Thomas Helwys were among the group and both went on to lead Baptist churches. Theologian Paul Fiddes points out that one attraction of the covenant commitment for these early Baptists was that it provided a sense of connection and identity to people who had separated themselves from the national church. It enabled them to claim some continuity with all people throughout all time who were bound to God and to one another in covenant relationships in keeping with demands of radical discipleship.¹⁸ So from their earliest beginnings Baptists affirmed the primacy of the universal church, the invisible church of the faithful known only to God. Within Baptist ecclesiology, the universal church is not just a grouping together of many local church communities, but rather 'a universal reality which *pre-exists* any local manifestation of it, as God's eternal covenant with humankind pre-exists the local covenant bond,' so, as Fiddes explains, covenant and catholicity belong together.¹⁹ The local church is part of something greater than what may be seen, *and* Christ's true disciples are members of the visible church.

Radical Disciples Making Decisions

A Baptist ecclesiology recognises that the community of believers gathered in Christ's name is the context in which the Spirit speaks and guides the church through members of the congregation as they engage in reflection on, and exegesis of, the Scriptures together.²⁰ This does not mean that there is no need for professional ministers. Those who are appointed to such roles are those whose God-given gifts are affirmed by the church community. Martin Sutherland explains:

Are our Pastors more important than the rest of us? No. Are they unique possessors of the Spirit? No. Are they final arbiters of truth or congregational life? Certainly not! Nevertheless, the pastoral function is an essential element

¹⁷ This is paraphrasing William Bradford who recalled the events years later. His work, *William Bradford, History of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647*, ed. W. C. Ford (2 Volumes; Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1912), 20-22 is cited by Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Eugene: Paternoster, 2003), 21.

¹⁸ Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Eugene: Paternoster, 2003), 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁰ Stephen Holmes also makes the point that 'discernment' in the Baptist context does not refer to 'quiescent mysticism.' The Bible is always central to the discernment of God's will for the congregation. See Stephen Holmes, "Knowing Together the Mind of Christ: Congregational Government and the Church Meeting," in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haymes*, ed. Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2011), 175.

in congregational health. It is one way in which our commitment to the priesthood of all believers is shown to work.²¹

Because the church is recognised to be both the *site* of Christ's presence, and the *means* of discerning his will, Baptist church leaders are required to be committed to a process of discernment. Andrew Picard writes:

At its best, the Baptist vision is not about a democracy where majority rules but a Christocracy where Christ reigns and rules in the church and directs it in his ways by the power of the Spirit.²²

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has been applied to church meetings which were recognised as forums for the Spirit to be heard through the different voices of the members of the congregation. Meetings provided opportunity for all voices to be heard without discrimination or argument, then in what was a radical and counter-cultural demonstration of equality in Christ, all baptized believers, men and women, were able to vote. In this way the authority to make decisions rested with the congregation. Clearly, this model worked best in small or medium sized congregations.²³

The leadership offices in Baptist churches were first envisaged in contrast to the Anglican Church and to society at large. As pioneers of a community of radical disciples, Baptist church leaders upheld certain freedoms, particularly the freedom of the church from the state, but also freedom of conscience, freedom to interpret the Scriptures, and to respond to Christ's leading whatever the cost. These remain strong values in present-day Baptist culture.

²¹ Sutherland, *Radical Disciples*, 54.

²² Andrew Picard, "Be the Community: Baptist Ecclesiology in the Context of Missional Church," in *The Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* Vol.5 No.1 (April 2009), 56.

²³ According to the Baptist Churches of New Zealand Directory 2012, 50% of all Baptist churches in New Zealand have less than 50 members, 90% of Baptist churches have less than 350 members. In churches of this size it is conceivable that congregational meetings be organised so that all members are able to contribute.

Growing Healthy Churches

The commitment to evangelism and missionary action on home ground has also been an enduring feature of New Zealand Baptist culture from its earliest beginnings.²⁴ Baptists have frequently oriented church life and leadership around mission and have shown willingness to give things a try.²⁵ For example, in the 1970s and early 1980s Baptist churches throughout New Zealand fostered the development of home groups. In some churches this was a strategic move towards an area congregation model.²⁶ Small congregations were 'planted' and maintained supportive links to the sending congregation.²⁷ Many present-day Baptist churches were first planted and nurtured by older and more established sister churches that provided administrative support, paid stipends, supported students through their training, and provided mentoring and encouragement.²⁸ What Rowan Williams has described as a 'mixed economy' does exist in the Baptist Union of churches.²⁹

Also, in keeping with the commitment to local mission, the Baptist Union of New Zealand became aligned with the church growth movement initiated by Donald

²⁴ Laurie Guy provides a sample of Baptist evangelistic endeavors that have been reported in the denominational magazine. See *Baptists in Twentieth Century New Zealand* (Auckland: New Zealand Baptist Research and Historical Society, 2005), 1-22.

²⁵ The Baptist propensity to give priority to action and missionary activity is not entirely positive, and may be at the expense of theological reflection or the integration of lessons learned from history. It is noteworthy that many church leaders within the Baptist movement do not have any theological qualifications. A mere 59% of Registered, Provisionally Registered and/or Accredited Ministers have achieved a diploma or higher according to the 2013 Directory of Baptist Churches.

²⁶ This model was particularly in evidence at Spreydon Baptist Church in Christchurch. Kevin Ward describes the circumstances that contributed to the adoption of this model of church growth, such as the compulsory 'carless' days, a measure adopted by the National government in 1982 to address anticipated fuel shortages. There was a perceived need to have churches located within reasonable walking distance of all. There were also several visits from overseas Christian leaders who advocated for focus on local communities. See Kevin Ward, "Against the Tide: Spreydon Baptist Church 1960-2000," *NZJBR* (October 2004), 88-89.

²⁷ Bruce Patrick, who was the director of Home Mission for the Baptist Union during this time, was convinced that church planting like this was the most effective way to promote the evangelization of New Zealand. See for example "Multiplication: The Key to Growth" in Bruce Patrick ed., *New Vision New Zealand* (Auckland: Vision New Zealand, 1993), 247-273.

²⁸ For example, in Auckland the Baptist Tabernacle and Windsor Park Baptist Church have been involved in church planting initiatives for decades. Several leaders in the Auckland churches were involved in the purchase of a parcel of land in the Botany area on the basis of projected population growth. This enabled the Eastgate Baptist Church to be established in what has now become a sizeable community.

²⁹ Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, describes the mixed economy of the Church as the existence of fresh expressions and inherited forms of church existing alongside one another within the same denomination in relationships of mutual respect and support. See <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/category/story-tags/mixed%20economy>> Accessed 4 October 2012.

McGavran, who developed the 'homogenous unit principle.'³⁰ At the 2000 Baptist Assembly in Tauranga assembly delegates voted overwhelmingly in favour of committing themselves to the vision of 'Growing Healthy Churches – thriving through mission,' as it was described by the Assembly Council taskforce. Peter McNee, a former minister and missionary, and then a leadership consultant, headed the taskforce. He presented the proposal to the assembly:

The Baptist Movement of churches commits itself to intentional mission and evangelism in New Zealand, believing Christ is concerned about the salvation of every New Zealander and their community.... to achieve this the Assembly directs the Baptist National Centre and national ministries to be resources for the churches in this mission and evangelism commitment and to work with the churches for their health and growth.³¹

This vision of New Zealand Baptist Churches as a movement of local churches whose priority is to do the work of mission by proclaiming the gospel in word, deed, and sign has been endorsed at successive annual conferences.³²

After the 'Growing Healthy Churches' strategy was adopted, consultants Paul Borden and John Kaiser came to New Zealand to work with key leaders.³³ Two new roles were created. The Union appointed a National Consultant in 2001 and a National Leader in 2002. The change in the shape of the leadership structure of the denomination generated considerable disquiet, particularly the appointment of the

³⁰ Donald McGavran (1897 – 1990) has been credited with stimulating the church growth movement. He rejected mere philanthropy as missional activity and considered that discipleship of believers was essential to the Church's mission. The 'homogenous unit principle' was based on the observation that people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers, preferring to associate with those who are like them. See Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed., ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), x, xvii.

³¹ *New Zealand Baptist* (December 2000).

³² Since that time the National Leadership Team have continued to advocate for the re-structuring of church leadership groups; clarified roles, responsibilities, and lines of accountability; and collected statistical data on membership and baptisms as measures of effectiveness. The proposed changes involved significant restructuring to streamline the process of decision making, and create clear lines of responsibility and accountability so that mission and ministry action would be prioritised. The fact that this was needed reveals that local congregations had, of necessity, moved away from simple congregational governance and frequent members meetings. Churches were run by church boards composed of committee representatives, though anecdotally the most powerful person in many Baptist churches was the church secretary/treasurer who ran the accounts.

³³ Guy and Sutherland, *Leadership and Baptist Church Governance*, 145.

National Leader.³⁴ When he was confirmed as the first National Leader, Brian Winslade said

Like a coach on the sidelines we will work with and train those who are willing to address issues of growth and health in their unique context. Or, as Paul Borden expressed it, the role of the denomination in the 21st century is less like a ‘family of churches’ and more akin to a true ‘para-church’ agency working alongside those with vision and commitment to be the people God calls us to be.³⁵

The staff-led (or ministry-led) model being advocated was designed to shift the work of ministry away from professional pastors and deacons boards, and on to members of the congregation who were actively engaged in different kinds of ministry. It was designed to empower the members of church ministry teams by providing them with responsibility to set their own goals and to manage their apportioned resources in keeping with the churches shared vision and unique missional focus, rather than having to run every decision through the deacons’ board. Anyone heading up a ministry area, paid staff or volunteer, was given authority to make operational decisions. They were to be directly accountable to the pastor, who was in turn accountable to the governance team.³⁶

In Brian Winslade’s view, future growth and health required New Zealand Baptist churches function like para-church mission organisations rather than churches. This contains an implicit denial of the value of the church within the mission of God, and failed to affirm the church as the location and means by which Christ is made visible in the world. As National Leader, his narrow view of mission set the course for New Zealand Baptists, but Winslade was controversial figure and his endorsement of the

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Brian Winslade, “A New Saddle, a New Rider and a New Horse!” *New Zealand Baptist* (Sept 2001), 5.

³⁶ The governance team was a new concept. The sole or senior pastor was a member of the governance team. The other members of the team were elected members of the congregation and were to act on behalf of the congregation, who are regarded as ‘permission givers.’ Rather than having one group of church leaders dealing with everything from the pastor’s stipend to choosing fabric for curtains, the tasks of governance and management were separated. Administrative tasks such as managing finances and procuring equipment were undertaken by the management team which was regarded as a ministry team. The governance team was responsible to set the direction for the church, which involved discerning and articulating the church’s unique missional focus, creating strategic plans, and overseeing the employment of key staff. They were to focus on dreaming and envisioning rather than implementation. The pastor was then responsible to lead and empower the ministry team leaders. Lindsay Jones, “Staff-led Model puts focus on mission as main task,” *New Zealand Baptist* (August 2002), 7.

ministry led model fueled suspicion and debate associated with the perceived disempowerment of the congregation.

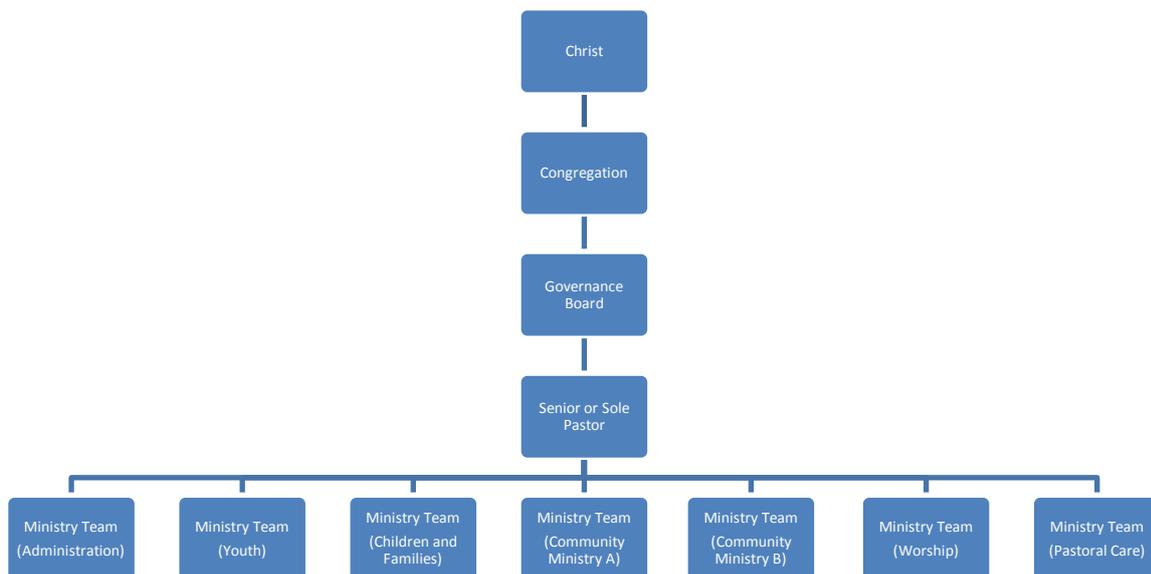


Figure 1: The Ministry Led Model

Examples of some types of ministry teams are in parentheses. Different local congregations would be expected to have teams that reflected their context and missional emphasis.

Of course no church would be compelled to make the changes that were proposed by the National Centre because the autonomy of the local congregation is paramount to New Zealand Baptists. Laurie Guy and Martin Sutherland observed that one effect of this restructuring is that tacit endorsement has been given to more apostolic approaches to leadership where authority is invested in an individual, which reflects a significant shift in ecclesiological practice.³⁷ In recent years, the move to the ministry led model (or staff led model) has certainly freed churches from getting bogged down in excessive bureaucratic processes and removed the need for special meetings to get the congregation to sign-off on trivial matters, but it has moved the centre of power towards the governance group and the pastor so that genuine expressions of congregational governance happen less often and any discernment process takes place outside the members meeting.³⁸

³⁷ Guy and Sutherland, *Leadership and Baptist Church Governance*, 146.

³⁸ Some church leaders are in favour of this. See Brian Winslade, *A New Kind of Baptist Church: Reframing Congregational Government for the 21st Century* (Sydney: Morling Press, 2010), 69-85.

Appointing Leaders

Baptist churches are free to appoint whoever they wish to leadership positions. Pastors are elected by the congregation. There is no longer any formal process of discernment regarding a call, and New Zealand Baptist ministers are no longer ordained.³⁹ Many, though certainly not all, Baptist church leaders are trained at Carey Baptist College. The college provides one setting in which church leaders critically engage with the 'growing healthy churches' material promoted by the Union. It is noteworthy that three churches that participated in this research project have strong links to Carey Baptist College which suggests these church leaders have experienced the benefits of connections beyond the local congregation and have encountered different ways of being Baptist.

³⁹ In 1996 at the annual Baptist assembly in Rotorua, Baptist delegates voted to do away with ordination and accreditation, and introduced a voluntary system of registration. This was a unique move among Baptists and at the time was adopted without controversy. The change allowed those with little or no training to be recognized as ministers. It also meant that those who were no longer in pastoral roles could not claim a ministry title. The role of pastoral leader was regarded a function, and so when the function ceased that person was no longer regarded as a minister. Unsurprisingly the uptake was low until it was decided that registration would be linked with the Baptist list of marriage celebrants supplied to the Department of Justice. See *New Zealand Baptist* (July 1997), 3 and (April 2009), 5. A few Baptists have questioned the theological grounds on which ordination was so quickly abandoned and registration instituted. There is agreement that it was necessary to rethink the way that Baptist leaders were recognized but registration has not established a reasonable theology that encompasses a leader's call, or a vision of the future development of leaders in the New Zealand Baptist context. See Martin Sutherland, "Rethinking Ordination and Ministry," *New Zealand Baptist* (April 2009), 5.

Chapter 2

Distinctives of Baptist Ecclesiology

If the beating heart of Baptist theology is ecclesiology and a particular understanding of the dynamics of becoming church, as Sutherland has suggested,⁴⁰ then it is necessary to explain these distinctive features so they can then be used to frame discussion of the four Baptist churches that are the subject of this project. Given the eclectic composition of New Zealand Baptist churches, and the autonomy of each local congregation, these distinctives will be news to many Baptists. Nevertheless, I will contend that there is a uniquely Baptist ecclesiology and that it contains implications for the way churches are ordered and approach mission.

Radical Disciples Bound Together in Covenant

Having separated from the Church of England, the first Baptists expressed their commitment to their new church community by covenanting to walk with one another in God's ways with God's help.⁴¹ They believed that it was the Lord who had called them in to fellowship and they expressed that faith through the covenant they made. The covenant was not simply a horizontal interpersonal pledge to be faithful to God and to each other, but there was also a corporate dimension. In the same way that God covenanted with people through the Old Testament, so God covenanted with the gathered community: God, as revealed in Christ Jesus would be their God and they would be God's people.⁴² Any missional action undertaken by a church community can be understood as flowing from their *identity* as God's covenanted people.⁴³ By the nineteenth century Andrew Fuller was convinced that individual churches should adapt their leadership structures to fit their unique circumstances, and that the organization of the church was always meant to serve the church's

⁴⁰ Sutherland, *Radical Disciples*, 12-13.

⁴¹ This is paraphrasing William Bradford and is cited in Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Eugene: Paternoster, 2003), 21.

⁴² Paul S. Fiddes, "Theology and a Baptist Way of Community," in *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way* (Oxford, Whitley Publications, 2000), 33.

⁴³ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 78.

function as a 'dynamic mission agency'.⁴⁴ Mission, therefore, was not conceived on individualistic terms. Any *doing* flowed from *being* united to Christ who gathered His church to himself and to each other.

Implicit in the concept of the covenanted community was an acknowledgement that faith was, and is, not a private matter. Christ's disciples are not only brought into a personal relationship with Christ, they are bound to the community, and an individual's faith is lived as a member of the community.⁴⁵ This conviction sits with another deeply held Baptist principle, the freedom of conscience. To modern ears this sounds like the church defends an individual's right to believe whatever they want and to remain within the church but that is not so. The first Baptists defended the right of an individual to choose their religious allegiance with freedom from state intervention.⁴⁶ They were of course adamant that following Jesus was the only way to be saved, but defended the individual's right to make other choices. If someone's belief did not fit with the local Baptist church, then they were choosing to remain outside the community.⁴⁷ It was all or nothing. Radical discipleship was a commitment to God *and* to the faith community, the visible church.

The Church is Visible

The belief that the only church that is truly real is the invisible church composed of those known only to God has been attributed to Augustine who introduced the idea in his efforts to refute the Donatists. A Baptist ecclesiology includes the idea that the church is both invisible and the visible physical presence of Jesus Christ in the world, and he now lives his life through his people.⁴⁸ In fact, this is a distinctive feature of Baptists, as Martin Sutherland explains:

⁴⁴ Derek Tidball, "Leadership and Baptist Church Governance: Historic Perspectives" in *Leadership and Baptist Church Governance*, ed. Graeme Chatfield (Eastwood: Morling Press, 2005), 28.

⁴⁵ Stephen Holmes reiterates the point made by Stanley Hauerwas throughout many of his works, that the Christian community should be a place of 'detoxification' where Christians engage in practices that shape their beliefs, attitudes, and lives, in accordance with our shared calling in Christ. See Stephen Holmes "Knowing Together the Mind of Christ: Congregational Government and the Church Meeting," in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haymes*. Eds. Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies, 2011), 177.

⁴⁶ Sutherland, *Radical Disciples*, 50.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 197.

In a way more radical than most other Protestants they [Baptists] gave heightened priority to the invisible church. This is, after all, the ‘true’ church, the only church which matters at the end. The thinking was different from the Catholic position or even that of most Protestantism. In the Baptist view you didn’t join the visible church to be saved, you were in it because you were already saved. The visible church is not an entry point to the invisible church; it is a colony of it.⁴⁹

As the only visible manifestation of the universal and invisible Church, the local congregation is recognised to exist in continuity with the children of Israel who were liberated from Egypt several millennia ago, and also with the eschatological community of the future. James McClendon puts it simply: *this* [the church in the world today] is *that* [the people of God in history and the eschatological kingdom], and *then* [God’s mission to redeem a people through history and the formation of the future eschatological community] is *now*, they exist in continuity.⁵⁰ This important principle enables the church to recognise itself as the church.⁵¹ So the present visible church makes God’s eternal kingdom visible to the world, and Christ’s disciples live in the context of the visible church. But because the past and future invisible church is recognised as the true church, it is accepted that the local visible church reveals only a fragment of God’s mission which will not be complete until kingdom come.

The Protestant reformation rightly insisted that salvation is by faith rather than by membership in the visible institutional church, but in our time some have taken this thought to an unhealthy extreme in at least two ways. First, if the true church is invisible then there is no compelling reason to ensure that there is unity in the visible church. When disagreements arise, people all too readily part company with little regard for the inherited forms of church life. Instead priority is given to the local and the particular, as if that is all there is to being church, as Kevin Ward has said.⁵² Secondly, many consider Christianity to be something internal, something personal

⁴⁹ Sutherland, *Radical Disciples*, 27. This is also discussed by Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Eugene: Paternoster, 2003), 199ff.

⁵⁰ McClendon, *Systematic Theology Volume 1: Ethics*, 32.

⁵¹ James McClendon, *Systematic Theology Volume 2: Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 385.

⁵² Kevin Ward, “It Might Be Emerging But Is It Church,” *Stimulus* Vol.17 No. 4 (2009), 6.

and individual, private and largely invisible, and assume that a life of faith can lived outside the church community.

The belief that the true church is invisible does not mean that the visible church is unimportant.⁵³ Quite the reverse! Kevin Ward reminds us that Jesus left behind a visible community, not an invisible concept.⁵⁴ The way that members of the visible church share life together reveals the true invisible church to the world. As a colony of the invisible church, the visible church is recognised to be the context in which God's salvation and discipleship are lived out in the present.

An historic baptistic ecclesiology recognises that the true universal church has no denominational boundaries. By affirming the existence of the invisible church, Baptists are affirming the catholicity of the universal church and the breadth of God's reach in salvation. This is coupled with a strong assertion that faithful believers are called to make the church increasingly visible in their own time and at their own place.⁵⁵ Invisibility is not desirable or justifiable. That is why, as Stanley Grenz points out, the church that exists at a particular time in history and in a particular location, in covenant together, will give careful attention to the on-going development of the visibility of their faith communities.⁵⁶

Although the church is far from perfect, it is Christ's body and glorifies God in that the divine nature is revealed in its visible form as well as functions. As Sutherland says, the church does not merely do mission; it embodies it.⁵⁷ Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz expresses the implications of this understanding:

[T]he identity of the church in the world does not focus merely in bringing into the fold those whom God elected before the creation of the world. Rather at its heart is the goal of modeling in the present the glorious human fellowship that will come at the consummation of history. The church, therefore, is a

⁵³ Sutherland, *Radical Disciples*, 27.

⁵⁴ Ward, "It Might Be Emerging But Is It Church," *Stimulus*, 6.

⁵⁵ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 206, 247.

⁵⁶ Stanely J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 628.

⁵⁷ Martin Sutherland, "The Kingdom Made Visible: a missional theology of church" in *Stimulus* Vol.13 No.1 (February 2005), 6.

foretaste of the eschatological reality that God will one day graciously give to his creation. In short it is a sign of the kingdom.⁵⁸

So the gathered church visibly expresses God's salvation through relationships between believers. Sutherland rightly insists that although it is obvious that the church does not consistently reflect the joyful harmony that is the fruit of God's redemption, kingdom life remains the church's only calling. The 'missional church (for there is no other kind) exists to make the kingdom visible' to all creation – not only to unbelievers but to all creation.⁵⁹ This places considerable significance on the relationships believers share, their common life. And because Christ has broken the barriers that separate human beings from one another Fiddes goes so far as to say:

There is only true church when the assembly is made up of the old and the young, employed and unemployed, male and female, black and white, healthy and handicapped. It should also be made up of those who have quite different tastes in music, sport, films, television programmes and clothes (and these are sometimes the hardest to live with).⁶⁰

It is in the visible diversity of the church that God's mission is expressed. Consequently, mission strategies that seek to create homogenous groups of people, because it is easier and more comfortable, are actually contradicting the movement of the gospel of Christ who brings together those who have little in common with one another, they are united in Him and that is to His glory. Questions like 'Who is God calling us to be?' and 'What are the distinguishing features of a Baptist vision?' demand attention.

The Ecclesiastical Minimum

So from a Baptist understanding what makes a gathering a church? Is there an 'ecclesial minimum' required to be rightly called a church?⁶¹ The answer is yes.

⁵⁸ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 624.

⁵⁹ Sutherland, "The Kingdom Made Visible," *Stimulus*, 7.

⁶⁰ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 81.

⁶¹ The phrase 'ecclesial minimum' is used by Nigel Wright. See Nigel Wright, *Free Church Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (London: Paternoster, 2005), 18.

The church is a visible community of faith, people gathered by Christ to be priests and witnesses, and to James McClendon a distinctive Baptist vision contains five elements: a commitment to Biblicism (awareness of the biblical story as our story), liberty (the duty to obey God without state help or hindrance), discipleship (life transformed by Christ), community (shared life and shared witness), and mission (responsibility to witness to Christ no matter how costly).⁶² The common life of Baptists is shaped by these elements in at least two ways.

First, to be a church is to recognise that members are gathered by Christ and gather in Christ's name as an act of worship. A gathering in Christ's name is a gathering for Christ's purposes and no other agendas. The gathered church is regarded as the *site* of Christ's presence and Baptist writers like James McClendon, Paul Fiddes, Nigel Wright and Martin Sutherland all affirm that the church is constituted by the presence of Christ.⁶³ The aphorism *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia* ('where Christ is there is the church') applies here.⁶⁴ The presence of Christ in the gathering of believers is the foundation for all worship. Christ is our high priest, who by his love leads all creation in worship so that human beings gathered in him are transformed. This means, as Jason Goroncy points out,

that our life and our worship are at core about participation in the life of another. It does not mean that each of us can be our own private priest exercising our own private arrangements with God. Far from it. Rather it means that our worship is our joyful 'Amen' to and sharing I Jesus' own worship to God in the liberty and power of the Spirit.⁶⁵

⁶² McClendon, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Ethics*, 27-34.

⁶³ Fiddes recognises that this raises some questions. For example how Christ's presence in the world, outside the community of faith, to be understood?

⁶⁴ These words are attributed to both Ignatius and Cyprian. See Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Eugene: Paternoster, 2003), 158 and Nigel Wright, *Free Church Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (London: Paternoster, 2005), 18.

⁶⁵ Jason Goroncy, "Mission and the Priesthood of Christ," an address to the elders of the Southern Presbytery, Windsor Community Church, Invercargill, 17 August 2012. <<http://knoxcentre.ac.nz/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/goroncy-mission-and-the-priesthood-of-christ.pdf>> Accessed 12 November 2012.

Uniquely Christian acts take place when the church gathers, and in Christian gathering the gospel is proclaimed, heard, confessed, celebrated and lived. Preaching has always been a feature of Baptist gathering. While the Reformers proposed that the marks of the true church are the proclamation of God's word and the administration of the sacraments, Baptists reframe the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as ordinances⁶⁶ and add the idea that the true church is a community of disciples who are joined to God and to one another by a covenant. A Baptist ecclesiology places great weight on Matthew 18:20, 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.' It is understood to mean that the Spirit of Christ is uniquely active when believers gather together. The church is a visible community of baptised believers, as few as two or three, who are consciously joined to God and to each other in covenant at a particular location.⁶⁷ This is in contrast to groups of two or three Christians who gather for other purposes; not every group of Christians can rightly be called church. It is not the religious affiliation of individuals that creates a church. A group of people who happen to be Christians playing scrabble or having a meal together is not a church. The church is a community of Christ's disciples who live in covenant with God and one another by conscious commitment. The church is aware of its identity and purpose as those gathered by Christ, and gathering in His name. There is an implied unity between those who are called together by Christ and who gather in Christ's name to seek him; they have a shared identity and a shared purpose.⁶⁸ As people seeking to embody God's kingdom, believers are called to flesh out Christ's self-giving love in sacrificial commitment to real people in a particular place and time in human history. The call to follow Christ is a call to serve, to be Christ's servants in the world. In this way Christians can rely on Christ to work in and through the gathering renewing faith, expressing forgiveness, healing, guiding, and sustaining

⁶⁶ The difference is that an ordinance is a symbolic action, a dramatic rite that is not regarded as conveying grace or having any power in and of itself. Believer's baptism is frequently described as an outward display of inward reality. Communion is regarded as a memorial meal and is performed in obedience to Christ's command to remember him, see 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. Any member of the church can preside over the ordinances of baptism and communion when the congregation is gathered.

⁶⁷ See Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Eugene: Paternoster, 2003), 29; Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 137; Nigel Wright, *Free Church Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (London: Paternoster, 2005), 18-19.

⁶⁸ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 136.

their lives as those who live under Christ's authority and recognise him as the source of their lives.⁶⁹

Second, through worship the church community bears witness to Christ as servants of his kingdom, and expresses God's ongoing salvation. As Christ's body the local church is to be regarded as a manifestation of the universal church on earth and a part of something much greater than itself. The church exists by God's initiative and not human decision. Believers do not make themselves in to a church.⁷⁰ Miroslav Volf, in providing an ecclesiology for the Free Church tradition, explains that by Christ's presence in the local church through the Spirit every church is united to all others throughout all time so the church proleptically experiences the eschatological gathering of all believers united in Christ insofar as the church recognises itself as being within God's story, and the unfolding revelation of Jesus Christ through time: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, built on Jesus Christ as attested by the apostolic writings.^{71 72} So the church seeks to identify with the mission of God in the ongoing formation of disciples.⁷³ The church incarnates God's mission to save. Members of the church are all regarded as priests who express God's mission to redeem and restore all creation. As priests the members of the church mediate Christ to one another and also remain open towards outsiders and newcomers, and facilitate their inclusion in the body.

Members of the gathered church are responsible to help one another mature in a process that is, as Keith Jones says, always personal but not individualistic.⁷⁴ This involves the priestly tasks of encouragement, admonition and proclamation of God's forgiveness.⁷⁵ It also acknowledges that there is room for everyone in the church community. Keith Jones explains that Baptist theology does not allow for the baptism of an individual without them becoming identified with the local congregation and

⁶⁹ Ibid., 146.

⁷⁰ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 42, 78, 233.

⁷¹ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 145.

⁷² Ibid., 146.

⁷³ Keith Jones, "Rethinking Baptist Ecclesiology," *Journal of European Baptist Studies* No.1 (Sept. 2000), 12-13.

⁷⁴ Jones, "Rethinking Baptist Ecclesiology," *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 10.

⁷⁵ See McClendon, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Ethics*, 52.

welcomed in.⁷⁶ In Baptist ecclesiology the church is composed of adult believers, those who have pledged themselves to Christ and been incorporated by the Spirit and who have publically expressed that commitment in baptism. Baptism is not only regarded as a symbolic expression of a spiritual connection to Christ but it also signifies full membership and covenant commitment to the local church. In place of a covenant bond it is now more common for members of Baptist churches in New Zealand to be asked to sign a member's pledge which typically commits them to praying for the church, giving as they are able and sharing their faith with others. Children and non-baptised adults are not asked to make this kind of commitment but nor are they regarded as full members of the church and they do not have the right to vote at member's meetings. Baptists consider that this reflects a hospitable culture that is 'committed at the core and open at the edges' and one that provides a clear direction for deepening commitment.⁷⁷

After baptism, it is assumed that all baptised believers have an equal share in God's grace without the need for any mediator but Christ, and the presence of Christ is mediated through the whole congregation rather than through ordained priests or sacraments.⁷⁸ Because the Spirit indwells all believers, and gives to each one gifts for the good of all, every member of the church is responsible to share their gifts and in doing so they bring the Spirit's presence to those around them.⁷⁹ This believers' church ecclesiology recognises that individuals receive different gifts from the Spirit and so roles and offices in the church will be filled on the basis of that gifting. That is why Miroslav Volf observes that, at their best, Baptist churches champion both volunteerism and egalitarianism. The believer is incorporated into the church voluntarily, the choice is both theirs and the community's, and thereafter the community is egalitarian in that the responsibility for the corporate life of the church rests squarely on the 'broad shoulders of the whole community.'⁸⁰ The phrase 'the priesthood of all believers' is frequently used as a justification for rights of equal

⁷⁶ Jones, "Rethinking Baptist Ecclesiology," *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 10.

⁷⁷ The phrase 'committed at the core and open at the edges' is attributed to Mike Riddell who applied it to Ponsonby Baptist Church when he was pastoring there. The phrase is still used by Ponsonby Baptist to describe themselves. See www.ponsonbybaptistchurch.org.nz

⁷⁸ Wright, *Free Church Free State*, 42.

⁷⁹ Sutherland, *Radical Disciples*, 53.

⁸⁰ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 2-3.

access, and the expectation that the church would operate as a participative democracy but as has been explained, this is a misunderstanding of the doctrine.

So to summarise, within Baptist ecclesiology, the local congregation is a group of people gathered by God to meet under Christ's reign, in covenant with God and with each other, and they are the visible expression of Christ in the world in so far as they express the hospitality of God to all people by their constituent diversity and their openness to include those beyond the core group. It is clear that within a Baptist vision Christian faith is not private, it is personal but not individualistic, it is visible in that there are visible expressions of believers' love and commitment to God and to one another, and it is also visible within the community in which it exists as an expression of openness and hospitality to those God is drawing in.

Chapter 3

Mission Challenges and Imperatives

There are many ways that the Church makes the goodness of God visible, but as Fiddes recognises, this will not be the result of human initiatives. God constructs the church, the body of Christ, and gives gifts that bring people in to connection with one another so that Christ may be seen with increasing clarity. God invites people to participate in the currents of relating that exist within the Trinity such as sending, sacrificing, self-donation, obedience, love and celebration. Through covenantal bonds the church exists in partnership with the Son in a relationship of mutual love and self-offering. To Fiddes these are the ways that Christ takes form in human life, and becomes manifest and tangible in the midst of relations between human beings.⁸¹ This very God-centred understanding has implications for the church's understanding of mission. The focus of any missional action needs to be relational. It is essentially a matter of developing a Christ-centred community. Fiddes explains the church's mission this way:

On the one hand the announcement of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ will result in new relationships; it will draw people who respond in to a new kind of relational existence within the community of the church and within God's own life. But on the other hand it also means that mission should take the form of community; the community of the church 'goes out' by opening up its life to draw in the alien, the outcast, and the estranged just as God makes room for us in an inner life of communion. The most effective form of mission may be the impact of community life of the church on its neighbourhood, not enclosed in self-preservation but open in risky welcome. Mission will thus be concerned with making relationships at every level of the world, in reflection of the Triune God. It will offer prophetic criticism of competitive individualism in society and seek to encourage political and economic policies that are committed to interpersonal relationships; it will also have a care for the whole

⁸¹ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 207.

natural creation, seeking to foster organic relations between animal and plant life, in partnership with humanity and beyond it.⁸²

What is refreshing about Fiddes's words is that the mission he describes is drawn from his awareness of the character of God, rather than being driven by anxiety about changes in society and a perceived need to change the church to be more relevant the secular world. There is a measure of confidence in the power of God to draw people, to grow church communities that are characterised by open hospitality, to raise prophets who speak in to society, and to guide the church to care for all created beings and the environment. This is an inspiring and optimistic vision. When mission is expressed through the church community in this way it means that the gospel is not limited to words and it brings people in to something beyond themselves as individuals.

Christ-centered Mission

Baptist theologian Nigel Wright insightfully suggests that the church will not be regarded as relevant until it is faithful to its calling, which means the church must not be defined by the demands of contemporary culture but must live true to its own story as it is revealed through the Scriptures and in history and theology.⁸³ Talk of relevance is common when the subject of mission is being discussed. There is a prevalent sense of despair over the perceived irrelevance of the church to society and many Christian writers today advocate for the re-creation of the church, not just rethinking what happens during Sunday services but also reallocating resources away from the maintenance of the institution.⁸⁴ Many Emergent church writers note that the church has lost the favoured place it once held in some societies, and that the decline in the numbers of people attending churches is evidence that the church is failing in its mission and that it must be overhauled so that it becomes relevant to disillusioned Christians and attractive to non-believers.⁸⁵ Writers like Cathy Kirkpatrick, Mark Pierson, and Mike Riddell have vividly described their struggle with

⁸² Ibid., 253-254.

⁸³ Wright, *Free Church Free State*, 3.

⁸⁴ A good example is provided by John Drane. See John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity and The Future of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd; 2000), particularly chapter 8 "Dreaming the Church of the Future" which begins by asking whether the church is living or dying.

⁸⁵ Picard, "Be the Community," *The Pacific Journal of Baptist Research*, 30.

the way that some churches have approached mission and concluded that it is necessary for Christians to create places that feel authentic and meaningful. They write:

Once upon a time my idea of 'mission' was getting together with one group of people in order to 'do something' to another group of people. Our group usually bore little resemblance to the other. We might have called our endeavours 'cross-cultural.' Where one whole lot of people are IN the church, and another whole lot of people are outside the church, then there is a need for some to cross borders and learn the language of the other. In these strange days the truth is that 'everybody' is missing from the church. While people all over the joint may be seeking and exploring spirituality and finding and experiencing God, few are flocking to church to conduct that search, or feel it necessary to join in an organized religion in order to live the life of faith. How can we expect others to come to church when we don't even enjoy it, or find meaning there? If we desire to meet others, and support each other as we try to follow the sandal-prints together, and share the puzzles of life and faith, then we must create something which we are prepared to own – meaningful for ourselves, which reflects the issues which we are facing in our lives, and which we consider has an integrity to which we are contributing.⁸⁶

These authors believe that the way this will happen is to organise the church around human needs. They consider that the church is shaped and controlled by people, and should be for people. Pete Ward shares their conviction and argues that the church community should form around what people find relevant and attractive, and to move in ways that are 'liquid' and responsive to the ever changing social climate.⁸⁷ This effectively separates the church from God as the source of meaning. Instead, as Mark Labberton has observed, individuals create experiences for themselves that they feel are authentic.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Cathy Kirkpatrick, Mark Pierson, and Mike Riddell, *The Prodigal Project: journey into the emerging church* (London: SPCK, 2000), 36. See also p 12-14.

⁸⁷ Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 89.

⁸⁸ Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 42.

There are problems with this approach to the church gathering. When individuals come to a church gathering in search of an experience, even an experience of Christian community, it makes it less likely that they will have a sense of being joined with others as one people.⁸⁹ It also makes them consumers rather than worshippers and priests, and puts a great emphasis on human endeavour. By contrast, radical discipleship centers on Christ. There is a reciprocal relationship here: the church is gathered by Christ and gathers in Christ's name. It is through Christ that church members are brought in to relationship with one another and with the world. The church community is a foretaste of the eschatological kingdom and bears witness to the world to the degree that the love and hospitality that Christ has revealed are embodied. One way that Christ's generous and self-giving love is disclosed is through a community that is open to outsiders, a place of welcome to strangers. Buildings have performed the important function of advertising the presence of the Christ-centered community.

Early New Zealand Baptists

In keeping with the practices of radical discipleship, one of the historical distinctives of the Baptist movement in New Zealand has been a commitment to local mission and evangelism. This was expressed as a desire to see people converted to Christ. In Canterbury a regional association was formed in 1874 as an expression of the commitment to develop greater connection between local congregations than had been common in England, for the purposes of evangelism and so that new churches could be formed and fledgling churches could receive support so that works of outreach could proceed.

From 1876-1880 the Canterbury Regional Association produced their own magazine and it recorded the growth and development of the local Baptist churches.⁹⁰

Evangelism and church planting feature prominently. Church leaders conducted week-night evangelistic services, Sunday school, children's meetings and Sunday worship services. These activities took place in church buildings, and by 1877 there were seven chapels across the Canterbury region. The wheat boom of the 1870's

⁸⁹ Tim Keel, *Intuitive Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 107-108.

⁹⁰ In 1880 this became the denomination's magazine and its name was changed to *The New Zealand Baptist*.

and 1880's certainly helped the Canterbury churches to flourish.⁹¹ The 1876 Annual Conference of the Canterbury Baptist Association reported:

The Association is in an excellent position to work. It is free from debt, and all the chapels in connection therewith are also entirely free from debt likewise—a statement few Associations of the kind are privileged to announce. Our staff of preachers (now reduced to fifteen or sixteen through death, removal, and other causes), though none of them particularly gifted, are still, we think, both in regard to ability and Christian deportment, equal to the general class of preachers in the colony. Fields are opening up everywhere.

The formation of a new church at Lincoln in 1877 followed a church planting strategy that is familiar today. Under the auspices of the Canterbury Baptist Association, members of the local community who were baptised Baptists met together with their families at the home of one of their number for worship. Local ministers joined them from time to time. After three years they created a 'Formula of Faith and Rules of Membership' on which the newly establish church would be founded. A pastor, deacons, treasurer and church secretary were duly appointed, and a parcel of land in the Lincoln township was donated for the construction of a chapel. The report in the *Canterbury Evangelist* reflects the assumption that this was simply prudent. They wrote:

A chapel is much needed, as, for many reasons, our Bro. Storey's house is insufficient to meet the requirements of a Church and congregation. . . . Contributions both of money and materials and labour will be thankfully received and duly acknowledged by the treasurer or secretary. Brethren and sisters, we earnestly beg an interest in your prayers, that amongst us all "the word of the Lord may have free course, run, and be glorified."⁹²

⁹¹ Martin Sutherland, *Baptists in Colonial New Zealand* (Auckland: New Zealand Baptist Research and Historical Society, 2002), 21.

⁹² *The Canterbury Evangelist* (November 1876), 32.

The development of the Baptist church in Lincoln serves as a representative example of the 19th century New Zealand Baptist approach to mission. Mission was strongly associated with evangelism and there was a commitment to having especially designated buildings as a site for many different kinds of ministry activity. It was recognised that the growing church needed room to gather together. They needed a place with enough space for every member. It is also apparent that the process of church building employed many different gifts and abilities of the members of the church community. Some made donations, some kept records, some occupied church offices, and all were invited to pray. These records also show that low levels of indebtedness were cause for celebration. The Canterbury Baptist Association and the Lincoln church records convey the belief that buildings were a means to an end, and that what mattered most was that God's truth be proclaimed.

These attitudes have persisted. Today, Baptists have tended to reflect the view that church buildings should be multi-functional, and they are not considered sacred spaces. A building's function is valued over its form, and the Baptist concept of mission leaves little room for spending money on art and design in keeping with a strong disdain for indebtedness that is evident in reports on building projects in these historical documents.

Church Buildings

It has been my experience that in conversations about church life there is an assumption that the church community has its own building. When a ministry colleague discovered I worked for a church that did not have buildings he was shocked, and wondered aloud why a church would try to do without their own space when buildings have served importance for over two thousand years. Most Baptists would agree. And in his remarkable work exploring the significance of religious buildings Harold Turner concluded that for the continuing community activities of the church a building is a practical necessity.⁹³

⁹³ Harold Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 325.

Early Baptists called their simple buildings ‘meeting houses,’ ‘tabernacles,’ or ‘chapels’ leaving the word ‘church’ to describe the people.⁹⁴ Those attending Baptist gatherings across New Zealand soon see that Baptists have not taken seriously the opportunity to tell and celebrate the Christian story in the architecture of their buildings. It would be reasonable to expect that a baptismal pool, something important in Baptist life, would be given special attention, but no. Baptisteries are often concealed under removable flooring, or a free-standing spa pool is used, something adapted rather than purpose built.

Church building consultant Richard Giles invites churches to ask themselves what their meeting spaces are communicating. He asks, ‘What is your church’s message?’⁹⁵ He recognises that buildings of all kinds are commanding preachers; they silently communicate values and feelings, they direct our attention different places, they shape our behaviour. Baptists’ lack of attention to physical spaces and to symbols reflects their commitment to church as people. Nigel Wright’s words certainly ring true when he says:

Before the church ever takes form as an institution, and before we factor in any place for buildings and ‘sacred places,’ the church is a community, a communion, a fellowship of persons in relationship.⁹⁶

For Baptists, the church is not defined by buildings but by the gathering of the people and their actions.⁹⁷ The presence of God is detached from physical structures and is located in the faithful community gathered by Christ. The divine presence does not occupy church buildings and make them holy places, only people. Architects of church buildings can translate the church’s self-understanding in to a visible message, but this requires that churches know who they are and why they gather. The New Zealand Baptist approach to buildings also communicates a commitment to functionality and thrift, and perhaps naively and mistakenly assumes that buildings are neutral spaces. The physical structures in which a church meets will exert

⁹⁴ Wright, *Free Church Free State*, 3-4.

⁹⁵ Richard Giles, *Re-pitching the Tent: the definitive guide to re-ordering church buildings for worship and mission*. 3d ed. (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004), 103.

⁹⁶ Wright, *Free Church Free State*, 5.

⁹⁷ McClendon, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Doctrine*, 413.

influence on what happens, or as one designer put it, ‘the architecture always wins.’⁹⁸ This principle has particular significance for churches who gather in other people’s spaces and who are guests or tenants. Buildings communicate values and priorities. Buildings also exert influence over the people who use them and shape their behavior. Like it or not, church buildings, or the lack of them, are part of the church’s witness and the mission of God.

I contend that within a historic Baptist ecclesiology the church is invited to be in constant re-formation as a people called to gather around Christ and to work out what that means in our ever-changing social milieu. An historic Baptist ecclesiology will provide a theologically grounded vision of church life in community rather than one that is driven by the marketplace, and the reason for the gathering is crucial to the formation of the church’s identity. This may mean, as Martin Sutherland suggests, that low attendance numbers are not necessarily a sign of the churches failure but that ‘the church made small as a mustard seed might be more like the kingdom than ever.’⁹⁹ Certainly small churches can adapt very quickly to change. God’s mission to save is visible in and through the church. The church is not a secret; it must be visible within the community in which it exists, open to newcomers, able to be found and joined. Buildings can be very helpful for marking the place where the community of faith may be found, and what it stands for. Churches have a measure of control over the spaces they occupy and to be true to their calling in Christ they do well to ensure their convictions are incarnated in wood and stone as well as in flesh. James McClendon suggests that Baptists will attend to four priorities related to their buildings:

(1) If conversion-baptism is a sign for us, the space for worship must be **accessible**; it must not be a ‘sanctuary’ from unpleasing visitors. The church must not occupy a space that says to any visitor ‘Keep out.’ Ground floor meetinghouses, easy traffic flow from street to assembly, facades that open to the stranger, the fearful, the lame, the alienated, these belong to the gospel house of prayer. (2) If prophetic preaching is a sign for us, the liturgical space

⁹⁸ This was said by a guest speaker at a gathering of designers, architects and church leaders hosted by Laidlaw College Christchurch in 2010.

⁹⁹ Sutherland, “The Kingdom Made Visible,” *Stimulus*, 7.

must be one where people can see and hear one another. Although this is easier in smaller spaces, even the larger Baptist congregation can have a **visible, audible** meeting...(3) If servants are not greater than their Master (John 13:16), and the Lord's table provides servants fare, then church space is **servant's quarters**, not a princely palace. This does not entail rooms either garish or unkempt; even a garage can be comely, even a storefront swept and garnished. A balance must be struck here: lavish use of costly materials strikes the wrong note, but so does pinchpenny construction...(4)...If in our meetinghouse of prayer we sense the awesome presence of the holy One, is it not a place where great dreams can be dreamed? Such **numinous space** may call to mind the wonder of San Vitale or the simplest chapel in the woods, or no building that ever was.¹⁰⁰

In this way the church may express the good news of wholeness and holiness for all creation.

The Church *Is* Mission

Within a historic Baptist ecclesiology the church and mission are inseparable.

Mission is not something the church does, it is something the church is; mission is first ontological rather than functional.¹⁰¹ Missionary action within a Baptist theological framework can then be explained this way:

The church which acts as body, temple and priestly people in practical ways in the world has the power to serve, to focus the presence of the Spirit and to mediate blessing *only* because it is caught up in the life of the triune God. It does not have its own mission, but shares in the mission of God towards the world, God's ecstatic movement of love which draws creation into fellowship with God's own self. This movement outwards is an expression of movements and missions of love within God, in which the church astonishingly is called to share.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ McClendon, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Doctrine*, 414-415.

¹⁰¹ Picard, "Be the Community," *The Pacific Journal of Baptist Research*, 29.

¹⁰² Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 73.

This differs from a prevalent view that 'mission' describes the externally focused actions of the church, and asserts that the very existence of the church is mission. The church does not merely proclaim the good news but embodies the gospel as a foretaste and witness to the world of God's intention to redeem all creation. This understanding sets the church in to the greater context of the *missio Dei*. Jurgen Moltmann said it well: 'It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church.'¹⁰³ So the church is part of God's plan to redeem creation but not the only means by which God reveals Godself. As the people of God, the church is particularly significant because together they are set apart within society to become a community of grace that seeks to further God's kingdom on earth.¹⁰⁴ With awareness of this important calling, the church recognises itself as the visible form of the continuing presence of God in the world. The church shares a common story, a history, a message, and a future hope.¹⁰⁵ In the day to day actions that are part of their life together the church community incarnates the Christ-life in the power of the Spirit and in doing so makes the gospel known so that the way decisions are made, the way power is exercised, the way resources are distributed, the priorities and values that are expressed, all overturn familiar social mores and reveal a radically different way of being a human community. That is the church's shared calling and goal. When the kingdom of God becomes visible through the church then anti-kingdom systems and relationships are exposed.

New Forms of Gathering

Some Missional church writers insist that the church needs to dispense with forms of mission that focus on the church and instead become incarnational communities that engage with society on society's terms. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch write about new forms of church that exist as intentional missional communities who gather in informal ways with a view to transforming relationships.¹⁰⁶ This reflects a significant

¹⁰³ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1977), 64.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Gibb "The Implications Of The Covenant Of Grace For The Church's Identity And Mission" in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* Vol.26 No.1 (Spring 2008), 86.

¹⁰⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, "What Could It Mean For The Church To Be Christ's Body? A Question without a Clear Answer," *Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol. 48 No. 1 (1995), 8-10.

¹⁰⁶ See Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 41-46.

shift away from a visible and identifiable church in a community, and emphasises a personal gospel. Incarnational community initiatives include cafes and restaurants, food co-ops, community gardens, and retail stores, that are organised and operated by Christians but are a part of their local community and are frequented by all-comers. So the community gathers around their shared lifestyle or workplace and this forms a context for mutual interaction in the hope that through the natural relationships that may form between individuals, people will be drawn closer to God.¹⁰⁷ There is a lot to be celebrated about these initiatives. However, there is an absence of an identifiable community of faith gathered around Christ, and that does not fit within a historic Baptist ecclesiology. Within a Baptist Ecclesiology there is an ecclesiastical minimum. There are some forms of Christian community and radical discipleship that cannot rightly be described as ‘church.’

Baptists Gathering Together

One obstacle to the formation of Christ-centred communities is the highly individualistic way that many Christians expect to live their lives today. The vision of Baptist ecclesiology and mission that has been described so far is communitarian and focuses on the gathered church as the means by which the gospel is seen and lived in the world. One persistent image associated with the concept of the invisible church is the scattered church. In its most useful rendering the scattered church refers to the people of God scattered through persecution or engaged in God’s mission in the social structures of the world. But it is also used to express the idea that individual members of the church, dispersed through their neighbourhoods, are invisibly bound to one another as members of the true invisible church. This is an idea that holds a great deal of traction, particularly with those who have found life in the church difficult for various reasons. It legitimises the view that Christian faith may be lived in isolation from a church community without compromise. You can believe without belonging. John Locke’s views have given some weight to this idea. He considered that the church to be a voluntary society and a dispensable human

¹⁰⁷ Picard, “Be the Community,” *The Pacific Journal of Baptist Research*, 34-35.

arrangement which allows for an individualistic kind of Christianity lived outside the church.¹⁰⁸ But as Paul Fiddes so clearly states:

But the local church is not a 'voluntary society' in the sense that membership depends finally upon the decision of the members to join. Rather, the gathering of the members is completely dependent upon the gracious initiative of Christ in 'gathering' his disciples, to which they respond in obedience.¹⁰⁹

When early Baptists emphatically declared that church membership was voluntary they spoke of adult believer Baptist as opposed to infant baptism, and insisted that faith was a matter of conscience and should not be coerced by the union of church and state.¹¹⁰ They recognized that God's call required people to make a deep commitment that contained significant responsibilities to the Christian community. Opting in and out of church life on the basis of personal preference was not in view.

The idea of the invisible scattered church must be challenged. It overstretches the concept of the invisible church and undermines the importance of the gathered visible church. The invisible church expresses a future reality to be experienced in all fullness at the consummation of God's kingdom, but God's kingdom is already visibly breaking in here and now in many ways and the kingdom can be seen and named when the church gathers. Within society the church that cannot be seen and experienced does not exist. Giving privilege to the scattered church tolerates a gospel that centres on a personal choice to become involved in a one-to-one relationship with God and focuses on the salvation of the soul rather than the whole world. It regards mission as something that some people do and it has added to the folly of shifting mission from 'we' to 'I', as if the gospel could be expressed through a single individual in isolation from the church. There is no, or only limited, appreciation of the church as the birthplace of Christ-centred new culture and God's agent of witness and transformation in the world. Discipleship is envisaged as a series of personal practices and moral choices rather than a shared life visibly incarnated in the church community. An individualistic rendering of the gospel regards the church

¹⁰⁸ See Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 41-42.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹¹⁰ Keith Jones, "Rethinking Baptist Ecclesiology," *Journal of European Baptist Studies* No.1 (Sept. 2000), 5.

as an optional extra; it has its benefits but it is not necessary. Personal faith can be supported by books, on-line sermons, music CDs, and likeminded friends.

It is my contention that the kingdom of God can only be expressed and seen through the collective, the church of two or three or more who gather in the name of Christ. There is a great difference between a healthy functional missional community and an individual just as there is a great difference between a call to personal conversion and a call to become identified with God's people as part of the church as an agent of transformation in the world.

This raises many challenges and questions, particularly for those who struggle with the church for many legitimate reasons, and those who spend most of their life participating in secular institutions. As will be seen, these are the kinds of issues that participants in this study continue to wrestle with.

Freedom to Experiment

A Baptist ecclesiology is spacious; because there is only a loose organisational structure within the denomination and there is plenty of freedom to change and to do things differently. The lack of centralised control means that those who want to explore new ways of being church are not hindered, but this lack of intervention means that they are unlikely to receive great support either. Within such a loosely bound denomination there will be genuine interest to follow the progress of the few enterprising individuals who are willing to lead the church in to uncharted territory. Paul Fiddes considers this openness to reinvention one of the marks of Baptist life, though this is couched with words of warning. He writes:

It seems to be a mark of Baptist life to adapt to the present and constantly to seek to re-invent itself, which at best can be seen as openness to the Spirit of God and at worst as neglect of the lessons which the Spirit has wanted to teach the church during history.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 21.

This project expresses my own genuine interest in the progress of four Baptist churches which were founded with the intention of re-inventing the way the church is practiced in our day.

Part Two

Chapter 4

Methods, Similarities, and Differences

This research project involved four New Zealand Baptist churches that have been recognised by the denomination, and they all appeared in the Directory of Baptist Churches in New Zealand. At the time this project was undertaken none of the four churches owned a designated church building, and they did not have a church office or any other identifiable physical presence in their communities.

The interviewees in this project were all key leaders. There were two interviewees from three of the churches, and one interviewee from the fourth church. Leaders were selected on the basis of the strength of their connection to the church and their role within it. Of the seven leaders interviewed five were registered Baptist pastors and the other two interviewees were leaders involved in governance, leading services, and financial management. Five interviewees had attended theological college and four had achieved at least a bachelor's degree. Four of the seven leaders were founding members of their church. One participant was a woman. None of the participants were employed full-time for the church. Only two of the participants were paid for the roles they performed.

I had worked for one of the churches in this study. (Church B, from 2007 to 2011.) I resigned from my position and moved to a new church community eighteen months before conducting the interviews with the leaders of that church. I am aware that complete objectivity is never possible in qualitative research and it is certainly not possible for me as a former staff member at one of the churches. However, the inside knowledge of the congregation that I gained because of having worked there helped me formulate my research questions, which has made this research richer.

	Number of Interviewees	Interviewees status within the church	Approximate number of regular attendees	Decade in which the church was founded	Location of church gathering
Church A	2	1 pastor* 1 key leader*	<40	1990-2000 (now closed)	Hired a public building
Church B	2	1 pastor 1 founding member who was also a key leader	80-100	1990-2000	Hired a public building
Church C	2	1 pastor and founding member* 1 pastor and founding member	<40	2000-2010	Met in homes and in a café
Church D	1	1 pastor who was also a founding member*	<40	2000-2010	Had free use of a large multi-space private building and met in homes

Table 1: Summary

**indicates the interviewee held a theological qualification of at least a bachelor's degree.*

Participants were interviewed individually at their home or workplace. They were asked nine questions designed to encourage more free-form discussion. The questions are listed in Appendix 1. The interviews lasted between one hour and three hours. All interviews were voice-recorded so that parts of the interview could be transcribed.

Similarities

The four churches in this study will be referred to as church A, church B, church C and church D. Accurate demographic data on the composition of these churches is not available.¹¹²

¹¹² The Baptist National Centre collects demographic data on the New Zealand Baptist churches but one of the churches involved in this project knowingly provided false information over a period of years. It is also difficult to count the number of worshipping adults in these churches because of their approach to membership has been rather fluid. Two of the three churches do not keep any records of attendance or demographic data on church participants.

The four churches have at least seven things in common. *First*, they all existed in vibrant suburbs within large urban centres. Each suburb was mostly residential but also home to cafes, shops and businesses. *Second*, all four groups were determined to be different from ‘normal church,’ and established their independence from ways of being church that were considered inadequate. Interviewees all expressed different degrees of frustration with conventional Baptist churches. One explained that ‘normal church’ was uncomfortable and shallow for those who had joined their group, many of whom had dropped out of normal church and were cynical and disillusioned. Another interviewee said that in their context little gestures like having tea and coffee available throughout the service felt excitingly radical and rebellious because that would never happen in the large church that their group had evolved from. Interviewees used ‘normal church’ pejoratively and associated it with being tame. *Third*, all four groups involved relatively small numbers of people.¹¹³ Three groups comprised less than 40 people. Interviewees from churches A, B and D all reported that the number of people attending worship gatherings had declined over time. *Fourth*, the interviewees shared a weariness associated with the Sunday gathering. The interviewees from Church C questioned the need for a worship gathering at all, but interviewees from churches A, B, and D expressed weariness that was physical and emotional. They were people who were all involved in the repetitious chore of opening up, setting up and packing down the church venue each week. One interviewee from church D said it was the reason they shaped their services away from music and the need to bring in instruments. Another interviewee described the type of equipment that was used in creating a multisensory worship service. This included things such as furniture, lighting equipment, art works, screens, and water features. They explained that limited access to the worship space and limited room for storing equipment stifled creativity because many exciting possibilities for services were shelved because often nowadays no one could be bothered to transport, set up, and pack down all the gear required. An interviewee from church A explained that some worship events took weeks to plan and organise, and it was discouraging to go to all this effort when only a small number of people attended the service. This weariness may be associated with the small size of these churches and their limited ability to share out tasks, but the obvious fatigue had not

¹¹³ The average sized Baptist church in New Zealand is 150 people. All four churches in this study were less than 150 people.

led them to reconsider their accommodation arrangements. *Fifth*, interviewees reported that most of the members of their churches were highly educated, white, generation Xers – a sub-culture characterised by a strong sense of individualism, a strong commitment to personal fulfillment and family life, adeptness using technology, active in their jobs and communities, and are determined to achieve success on their own terms.¹¹⁴ *Sixth*, when it came to the celebration of significant life events such as weddings and funerals the lack of church buildings meant that church members looked to other churches or specialist venues to host these occasions. None of the interviewees saw this as a significant issue. One suggested that many kiwis experienced the outdoors as sacred space and explained that their church had purchased a marquee and made it available to loan out when required. *And seventh*, each of the four churches were invisible in their neighbourhood. There was no enduring evidence of their existence or presence beyond their worship service if they held one. They were hard to find, and for three churches this was deliberate. Church B did not see the need for visibility, but both church B and church A put a small sandwich board or a flag with the church's name on it out on the footpath whenever the church gathered. Churches C and D had set up charitable trusts which had a significant public profile but the existence of the church, or Christians as the visionaries behind these trusts, was intentionally masked. Both these churches thought it more important that individuals made personal connections through the work of their trust rather than advertise the existence of the church collective.

Differences

There are many differences between the four groups too. *First*, they chose to be Baptist for very different reasons. Churches A and D were both determinedly Baptist and celebrated the historical Baptist distinctives of religious freedom, adult believer baptism, the priesthood of all believers, the importance of a reasoned approach to Scripture, the special significance of the gathered community and the call to live as radical disciples. By contrast, church B decided to be Baptist for pragmatic rather than theological or philosophical reasons. One interviewee said that no one in this

¹¹⁴ Generation X is a term coined by William Strauss and Neil House in their book *Generations*, (New York: William Morrow, 1991). Generation X describes those born between 1961 and 1980. Descriptions of the characteristics of Generation X were adapted from Miller, Jon D. "The Generation X Report." Vol. 1 Issue 1 (Fall 2011). <http://lsay.org/GenX_Rept_Iss1.pdf> Accessed 11 December 2012.

church really knew what being Baptist meant and explained that a significant proportion of those attending church B did not identify as Baptist at all; many had grown up in Brethren churches and valued independence from authority structures.¹¹⁵ The leaders of church C were Baptist because they had strong relational links to the Baptist movement and appreciated that this afforded a sense of legitimacy and relational support for the experimental missional model of church they were attempting. The *second* difference concerns the church's accommodation arrangements. The churches met in different types of buildings and chose their accommodation for different reasons. Churches A and B rented public buildings for their weekly gathering. The buildings were chosen for their location rather than aesthetics or functionality. An interviewee from church A regarded the building as too big for them and described it as large, blank, and echoing, and added 'when the lights were on it was a horrible space, but you could make it really dark and project images on to the walls, so the space was good when the lights were off!' Interviewees from church B expressed similar sentiments and explained that it was difficult to create a sense of reverence and lacked sense of home. One said, 'On a Sunday morning you walk in and the place smells of something else.' These feelings are significant given both these churches attached great importance to the worship gathering. Surprisingly, church C did not hold a public worship gathering and any meetings took place in homes. Church D had the use of a multi-space building rent free, so held their main gathering in a dining area around tables. Other meetings were held in private homes. A *third* difference was the time of day the churches chose to meet. Churches A and D met late Sunday afternoon and church members shared a meal together before (church A) or after (church D) the worship gathering. Church C members enjoyed a social gathering and a shared meal together on Sunday evenings. Church B met on Sunday morning, although one interviewee reflected that they received complaints from a few church members because some felt that Sunday morning was a great time to go to brunch and connect with non-church people. This interviewee also recalled that in recent history one church member had invited a significant proportion of the congregation to a Sunday morning birthday party and on another occasion a couple got married in a park on a Sunday morning, which also involved many members of the church. Both events had an

¹¹⁵ One participant explained that this church adopted a Baptist constitution, policies and organisational structure when they formed because it had seemed easier than starting from scratch.

unsettling effect on the worship gathering; a belittling effect. A *fourth* difference concerns the approach that each church took to the worship gathering. The communities of churches A and D adopted a litany, a liturgical form that enabled maximum participation by members of the congregation, and the members of the congregation were involved in all aspects of Sunday gatherings. Both groups gave careful theological consideration to the shape of the service and established a sustainable pattern that ensured the gathering remained Christ-centred. This was in stark contrast to church C's decision to focus resources on the people in their suburban community rather than on growing a church or organising a worship gathering. Church C had essentially forsaken the gathered-church context as an expression of the mission of God in the world. At the other end of the spectrum, church B put most of their resources in to their own church community because they believed the church existed to equip members to live as missionaries. Church B sought to offer impacting experiences characterised by new ideas and innovative forms of delivery. This made their Sunday gathering more consumerist than the other churches; members came to the church gathering in search of an experience and the perceived needs and preferences of the members defined what happened rather than there being a shared commitment to embody Christ to one another and the world. Church B's model also meant that the involvement of members of the church community in worship and discernment was more limited than at church A or D. A *fifth* difference concerns money. Only church D said that money was not an issue. They had minimal running costs and almost all the money they raised was given away to community projects. By contrast, churches A and B both employed staff which increased each church's operational expenditure significantly. This also required the church community to commit themselves to a budget and to administrative policies and procedures associated with conventional Baptist churches, and it seems to have curbed both churches appetite for taking risks. Church C avoided the need to address finances as a church community because they met in homes and leaders had private funding arrangements and other paid employment.

In addition to these similarities and differences two issues emerged that reveal a departure from historic Baptist ecclesiology. First, there was a significant difference between the four Baptist group's understanding of their part in the mission of God,

and the place that the local church has occupied in Baptist thought and history as described in Part One. And second, the four churches' approach to decision-making suggested that adult believer baptism was no longer regarded as entry in to membership of the church and that more inclusive, and less radical, forms of decision-making were in vogue. Both of these issues will be considered in detail.

Chapter 5

Reframing Mission and Rethinking the Decision-making Process

Self-Understanding and Mission

In Part One it was recognised and affirmed that the church *is* mission. Guder summaries this well, and explains the challenges associated with a high view of church. He writes:

The purpose of missional communities is to be a source of radical hope, to witness to the new identity and vision, the new way of life that has become a social reality in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. The persistent problem is not how to keep the church from withdrawing from the world, but how to keep the world from distracting the church from its purpose of cultivating the people of God. As sign, foretaste, agent, and instrument of God's reconciling love and forgiveness, the church makes Jesus Christ visible in the world.¹¹⁶

Notice that the witness he describes is not to be understood on individualistic terms; it is revealed in the church collective. This is what it means for the church to be Trinitarian. Members of the church are witnesses through their lifelong participation in shared and diverse ecclesial practices in a community that is centred and gathered in Christ's name. Together, members of the church are called to embody the language, rituals, and moral practices that reflect the interplay of belief and behaviour, in a climate of self-giving love.¹¹⁷ 'While not perfection,' Guder vividly explains, the church community bears witness to 'divine infection.'¹¹⁸

It was apparent that the churches in this project had very different ideas about what it meant to be missional. While all four churches had actively or passively rejected a church-centred model of mission involving a lot of programming designed to attract

¹¹⁶ Darrell Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 153.

¹¹⁷ See Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 147.

people in to the church community, they had re-framed mission in very different ways.

The interviewees differed in their attitude towards member care. Interviewees from churches A and C were adamant that individual church members should be responsible to nurture their own spirituality. One interviewee from church C said, 'there is enough brilliant stuff out there. Thirty years ago you might rely on the local church and some people still do but I think that's out of laziness.' Interviewees from churches A and C spoke of mission as something that happened outside the bounds of the church community. Interviewees from churches B and D both accepted that the church was responsible to care for its members and that this was a significant part of the churches mission. One interviewee from church D offered this: 'church growth is also about trying to get comfortable Christians to become disciples.' He explained, 'we take the priesthood of *all* believers seriously.'

Despite their insistence that members be self-feeding, church A interviewees demonstrated a deep appreciation of the importance of worship that was holistic and authentic. They distanced themselves from ways of organising Sunday church services that were regarded as unthinking, routine, and even insincere. Speaking of 'normal church' one interviewee said, 'I mean how hard is it to choose five songs and have a practice?' It isn't hard, and to the people of church A that was the problem. The church A community expressed their love for God and for one another by committing time and talent to creating thoughtful worship events. In their rejection of 'normal church,' or 'vanilla church' as one participant described it, church A raised the bar and embraced new practices as part of their Sunday gathering that were in keeping with the call to radical discipleship. Although many attempts were made to connect with non-church people in their local community, most energy was spent on the Sunday gathering. Reflecting on this one interviewee said, 'We never embraced the fact that we were a stage four church,¹¹⁹ a place for church refugees. It was

¹¹⁹ This is a reference to James Fowler's work in describing stages of faith. See James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith; The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995). Stage Four is the Individuative-Reflective Stage of faith development and describes the features of a maturing individual who enters a period of self-examination and critical thinking and is unwilling to accept simplistic answers to searching questions. Those in stage four are in a process of individuating and rather than assuming ascribed roles, beliefs, and attitudes they are committed to reconsidering their identity and their ideology. Development through this phase requires people negotiate the tension

never articulated but that's why people [came].’ Through thoughtful sermons, challenging discussions, and creative worship, church A provided a wonderful environment for disillusioned Christians to find acceptance and to recover. But leaders were not comfortable regarding the church itself as mission; engagement with the local community was a non-negotiable priority. For mission to be considered authentic the church had to connect in some way with non-Christian people in the local neighborhood. And so the church organised many events including art exhibitions, memorial observances, prayer meetings and craft workshops.

Church A's aspirational missional identity seems at odds with its actual missional emphasis as a group of stage four people exploring a new way of being church. Forays in to the local community were enjoyed by the members of the church who organised the events but did not lead to significant connections with their non-Christian neighbours.¹²⁰ As a community of cynical and disillusioned people it is apparent that relationships that provided mutual pastoral care developed unselfconsciously. For example, church members who met for a drink at the pub after the Sunday service were able to explore ideas at depth, to share personal struggles, and to receive encouragement. Ironically this also resulted in making casual connections with non-Christian members of the neighbourhood which suggests that there are many informal ways the church might have recognised and reframed authentic mission.

In stunning contrast to church A, members of church B were comfortable with the view that the church existed to meet their needs. The missional focus of members of this church was the workplace, which was considered the primary context in which each individual carried the gospel in to the world. Interviewees considered that members of church B lived lives that revolved around getting an education, becoming a successful professional, and embracing a lifestyle oriented around personal fulfillment. In this, church B tended to reflect social trends rather than engage in theological reflection and critique of them. It was also model of mission

between being an individual and being part of a group, subjective awareness and objective assessment, self-fulfillment and serving the needs of others, and the association between the relative and the absolute.
¹²⁰ It may have something to do with the nature of the events that the church community provided. Participants explained that these events did not involve partnership with other people or groups in the community and were not well attended.

that reflects a low view of the church as a witnessing community and also puts great emphasis on the character and conduct of individual Christians in their workplaces. Interviewees explained that organising church around individuals needs had not worked out well. One interviewee had observed a decline in the number of people attending church and an increase in the number of children in the congregation, and said, 'With the faith and work stuff there is very little accountability and it's very personalised. I don't think it's got a long term future. I like the idea that we need to have something as a group as opposed to everyone being in their wee little silos....There is a sense that we are growing up and getting responsible.' This comment suggests that the changing family circumstances associated with lifespan development and ageing had exposed the inadequacy of church B's missional focus. It is not clear whether church B were reconsidering their responsibility to bear witness as a collective, or whether they were still operating under the conviction that the church existed to meet their needs and enlarged this to include their children. One interviewee insightfully suggested that many personal needs could be addressed in the context of relationships that grow when you work together on a church team or when the focus is on something other than self, which is one way that both inward and outward focus can be held together. Clearly, church B's strong individualistic streak was being challenged and they were re-evaluating the place of the gathered and visible church in their lives, and in their neighbourhood. It may be that church B is an example of what Guder described, a group that has been distracted by the world from its purpose of cultivating a community of disciples as sign, foretaste, agent, and instrument of God's reconciling love.¹²¹ The consumerist attitude that regards the church as fuel for career and lifestyle choices has been challenged, and church B appeared to be moving in a more healthy direction as a process of re-orientation gained traction. Certainly, the incorporation of a new generation of young children had helped the community to identify and reject the most extreme expressions of self-interest, and to appreciate that they were no longer a homogenous group of Generation Xers. There is an opportunity here for church B to reconsider their ethos and to look for ways to grow a more age-inclusive community, or more radically, they could explore what it might mean for them to go beyond being a church centered around the needs of its own people to becoming a

¹²¹ Guder, *Missional Church*, 153.

church for the world, able to critique society and culture rather than being immersed in it. A logical next step for church B would be to lay claim to the validity of their Baptist heritage and to find an authentic way to express a covenantal commitment to God and to one another, and to explore the significance of their collective identity within God's mission in the world, a move that would require greater visibility in their neighbourhood.

Church C was also invisible in its neighbourhood, though church C was at a very early stage in development and really should be regarded as a missional experiment rather than a church. This exciting venture had many of the hallmarks of the historic Baptist expressions of faith. Boldness and costly commitment to following Christ are core values in keeping with radical discipleship, but there are some significant points of difference from a recognisable Baptist church. For instance, the members of church C are organised around their heartfelt concern for those who have no awareness of God. One interviewee said,

The biggest call in my heart was for the lost, and so the question for me was "how could the church become accessible and relevant and meaningful for those who have no faith," rather than "how do I spend my time continuing to keep those who do have a faith on track?" And so that led me on a path of complete freedom. I can try anything as long as I don't forget that mission is the reason the church exists

Notice the non-Baptist assumption that the church should be accessible, relevant, and meaningful for those who have no faith. Baptists have always asserted that the church is the gathering of the saved, those who are already disciples of Christ. If this is accepted then the church is unlikely to appeal to those who do not have a faith, but nor does it need to.

Also, church C's leaders have acted consistently with their underlying assumptions and were not committed to gathering believers in the name of Christ to engage in formative Christian practices such as preaching, communion, and discernment through reading the Scriptures, catechism, or member care. Instead they functioned as ministers to individuals within their neighbourhood and embraced the view that

God is at work in the world and in the lives of all people. They offered themselves as spiritual interpreters, naming and affirming God's generous self-revelation in the world. It is noteworthy that the Christian basis for their activities is concealed. Members of the church C community preferred that people got to know them as individuals first which echoes the church B view of mission, that individuals carry the gospel in to the world and are solo ambassadors, but in effect it was not possible to become involved in church C without a personal relationship with one of the leaders. Only those who received a personal invitation from a leader could enter in to the shared life of this group and become involved. Because church C is not visible, and its Christian identity is veiled, there is no clear way for outsiders to move in from the margins, or to take the initiative to make their own response. It is not clear how an emerging disciple might become a part of this Christian community and find a place there. One interviewee said, 'For us it is about journeying with different people, and because we are small we can tailor make stuff for them... but we are starting to think about creating some kind of front door, that time is coming.'

Further, church C required that Christians involved be self-feeding which seemed to be in conflict with their commitment to nurturing relationships and sharing life lived to the full, but actually is in keeping with a low view of the gathered church and lack of appreciation for the value or importance of the collective witness of the church community. It was apparent that church C had rejected a view of mission where the church community visibly exists as witness to the eschatological kingdom which suggests that they had given up on the church, not only as an agent of God's mission in the world but also for themselves as something to be valued and experienced. Although church C was a recognised Baptist church there are more reasons to question this. The vision for church C was carried by two individuals, and while the first Baptists asserted that when two or three gathered God was there in their midst, the circumstances around church C were very different to the early Baptists who were separating from the established church with ordained clergy, and the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. To early Baptists, recognition that God was present in a gathering of believers, no matter how small, enabled them to follow their conscience and leave the Anglican fold. It was not intended as a means for legitimating the fractionation of the church in to tiny independent units of likeminded individuals. So in summary, church C was not visible or accessible to others, it did

not hold a Christ-centred gathering of believers, and it focused on faith that was personal and private rather than shared with others in a covenantal community, and finally, church C did not attempt to develop sustaining and sustainable spiritual practices that would reveal the actual difference between the values and the culture of the church and the society in which it exists. For these reasons it currently fails to reach the ecclesiastical minimum to be rightly regarded as a church.

In common with churches A, B, and C, church D was not visible as a church in their community, and like church C this was deliberate. The church D community wanted to give themselves time to get established before announcing their presence. The group wanted to establish dual emphases: to find ways to be missionaries together in the neighbourhood and to live as a community of radical disciples in today's world. They committed themselves to God, to one another, and to generous actions to bring joy and beauty to their neighbourhood. Like church C, church D was involved in many good works through a trust without identifying themselves as Christians. For the members of church D, community-building voluntary work in their neighbourhood was an expression of radical Christian discipleship and was not primarily evangelistic, instead it serves the needs of Christians who want to do things that make the world a better place but who could not do so without support and collaboration with others. This work was carried out through partnership with non-Christian individuals and groups. Although church D were committed to growing a church they wanted to start with a theologically reasoned foundation for their actions and to explore what it meant to live and do things in the name of Jesus rather than in the name of a church. Their choice to make their trust their public face reflected their desire to be authentically missional before attracting wider attention in Christian circles. In this context the word 'authentic' refers to accomplishment of specific mission focused tasks.

In contrast to churches B, and C, and in keeping with church A, the church D community was happy to own a missional identity that emphasised in tandem both the importance of the gathered church and the need to maintain a visible witness within the local community. They recognised the need to promote these dual missional emphases, and to hold them in tension. Church D's approach had a lot to recommend it. It is theocentric in that it celebrates the work of God in the world and

extends a wide invitation to join in what God is doing. It also acknowledges the needs of Christians for on-going formation and the ability, and responsibility, of believers to minister to one another as members of a Christ-centred community.

When it comes to the missional identity of these four groups it is clear that the basis on which the church was founded has an enduring impact that can help or hinder the development of the church community. Churches A and B both placed significant emphasis on the Sunday gathering; both shared a desire for creative and meaningful worship experiences, but this ethic required access to a designated space for extended periods of time to work well. The lack of a building was a significant stressor to leaders and hindered both churches ability to function optimally according to their own priorities. Church D did not experience the same stress associated with their meeting place because they had a different worship ethic; their liturgical form could be readily transplanted in to different places. It didn't depend on creating a particular atmosphere or the use of instruments, multi-media and art. It was deliberately simple, and focused on talking and listening. In fact, of the four groups church D were the least dependent on buildings. Even church C needed to co-opt different spaces for their own missional purposes and used private buildings and a local business as a base for extending lavish hospitality in to their community. Churches A, B, and C all required housing of some sort to be able to function and to incarnate their distinctive mission but only church D created a form of church that could exist comfortably without church buildings and also develop connections within their neighbourhood.

The underlying difference in each group's philosophy of mission has undoubtedly shaped their present identity. Both churches A and B maintained a view of mission that was sourced in human endeavour and on activists taking the initiative to try new things. For church A, this was collectively expressed in the numerous one off events they offered their suburb. In church B individuals were encouraged to do their own thing. Either approaches required significant commitments of time and energy although it is clear that a collective action is more in keeping with a historic Baptist ethos. By contrast churches C and D approached mission through a process of discernment. They considered mission to be something that God was already doing in the world and saw it as the church's job to discover what that was and to join in.

Church C worked at a very personal and individualistic level, and church D took a two-pronged approach valuing both the church and the local neighbourhood as the locus of God's missional initiatives, and they worked collectively.

Notice that churches A and D preferred to work collectively while churches B and C work individualistically. And churches A and B put a lot of time and resources in to the Sunday gathering while churches C and D gave priority to work in the community. These differences are significant and might be explained on the basis of each group's age. Churches C and D were formed at a time when there has been significant discussion in the academy concerning the Trinity and the work of God in the world outside the boundaries of the institutional church in the post-Christendom era. Fresh expressions of church are bubbling up all over the globe and all the interviewees in this project accepted there was no one right way to be a faithful disciple or a vibrant and faithful church. Churches C and D are part of this movement and both groups share a desire to be where God is which requires them to venture in to uncharted territory. They both started from scratch and have demonstrated willingness rethink every aspect of Christian living and to embrace the risk involved in living counter-culturally. By contrast churches A and B both came to be at an earlier time, and they also emerged out of established Baptist churches. It is apparent that they defined themselves with reference to existing Baptist churches and while they changed emphasis and reformed the way they conducted Sunday services, they avoided undergoing more extreme reinvention particularly in regard to mission. Churches C and D are much younger groups and it is evident that their commitment to discerning God's activity necessitates openness to change and adaptation, and even embraces it. This guiding conviction requires each group to be committed to an on-going process of collective discernment, which is in keeping with the historic Baptist ecclesiology. The scope of discernment is somewhat limited in church C though; only church D held the dual convictions, that God is at work in the world *and also* in and through the church. It seems likely that the health of a congregation, as it evolves, is strengthened by an appreciation of the importance of their distinctive collective identity in keeping with a historic Baptist ecclesiology, but also appreciation of the breadth of God's mission in the world that includes the local church. The next section will describe the ways the four groups have approached discernment and decision making.

Baptists Making Decisions Together

In Part One it was established that within an historic Baptist ecclesiology the church is composed of adult believers who have been baptised. Traditionally baptism has been regarded as the mark of entry to the church, and with it comes all the rights and responsibilities associated with full membership. Believer's church ecclesiology recognises that individual members are bound to God and to one another, and are gifted by God to serve one another so that final responsibility for the corporate life of the church does not rest with individuals but with the whole community. According to Paul Stevens the church is to be an incarnational community that honours our dual needs 'to be me' and 'to be we'¹²² but it is clear that these four groups have struggled with the 'we' aspect of Christian community in different ways. Also, all four groups in this project have departed from the historical process of discernment that involved reflecting on the scriptures together and the requirement that only believers participate in the process of decision making. The two issues are related. Perhaps it is only possible to engage in a healthy process of collective discernment when members of the church are held together by some kind of abiding commitment to God and to one another.

Members of church A were taught that ultimately they were responsible for their own spiritual nurture. This was explicitly stated in their welcome brochure. Each year all the people who attended church A were invited to reassess their commitment to the church community at an annual commitment ceremony. Everyone regardless of age could participate. In this way the *me* and the *we* aspects of a life of faith were being honoured in very spacious terms. In actual practice the membership commitment did not convey any specific responsibilities or status. Everyone was welcome at church A and all were invited to be involved in every aspect of the gathering. The church was governed by a leadership team who brought significant decisions to the congregation to be discussed and then voted on, and anyone could vote, including very young children.

¹²² Paul Stevens, *The Equipping Pastor* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1993), 127.

Members of church B had reason to expect that the church existed to provide for their needs. Staff had been employed to tend to members needs and to maintain the day to day operations of the church. The organisational structures of the church were intentionally kept to a minimum to avoid making demands on attendee's resources so that they might be freed to focus their energies beyond the church. Church B is unique among the groups in that they adopted the ministry led model of church governance. This meant that the governance team and the pastor were delegated responsibility to make many decisions on behalf of the congregation. Decisions that required the congregation's involvement were put forward by the governance team who drafted a proposal, prepared discussion documents, hosted discussion groups, and provided opportunity for concerns and questions to be raised. The proposal would then be voted on at a special church meeting. Significantly, church B did not have a system of membership and so anyone in attendance at the meeting was able to vote.

Church C had an uncomplicated way of working through decisions. The two key leaders worked together to come to consensus, taking as long as they needed. They would seek advice from others if they felt it necessary and also met regularly with a group of colleagues to bounce ideas around but ultimately all decisions were made by the two key leaders.

From their very beginning, church D accepted and celebrated the fact that believers have responsibilities toward one another and recognised significant role the church community can play in mutual encouragement and the formation of faith. The interviewee from church D said, 'It's unfair to say to people "here is some material, take care of yourself" you actually need to walk beside them and show them what it means to care.' They felt this was a challenge in today's consumerist world and considered it was the church leader's job to move people away from their assumption that church should provide religious goods and services, towards recognition that all people are called to be Christ's disciples and are connected to one another. So their decision-making process was highly collaborative. This is the same interviewee described it: 'We take congregational leadership as really, really important. We are constantly talking together, everyone has a voice. We are constantly learning and discerning, in small groups and as part of our church service.'

The whole group discerns what Christ is doing together.' Together, as has already been described, church D worked on a range of social projects and each church member contributed according to their ability. The process of collaborative discernment was a distinctive feature of this group. The study of scripture had been a central part of their discernment and decision making, as they continued to ask 'what is God doing in our neighbourhood and how is He asking us to join Him?'¹²³ Perhaps unsurprisingly, membership was important to this group and each year members of church D were invited to confirm their commitment God and to one another. Church D did have a leadership group, but as the interviewee explained, their role was to teach people how to read the Scriptures, to coach small groups through a discernment process, and to involve everyone in the issues around the church's future development. The place of voting was not prominent in this group; they worked to achieve consensus.

All four churches had moved away from the believers' church model where baptism served as a once-and-for-all confirmation of membership and carried attendant responsibilities towards other believers, church life and mission. Church C were a special case. The two key leaders were baptised adult believers, committed to one another and committed to discovering together where God was at work in their community and how they might join in. It is apparent that they approached this process from the heart and intuitively rather than through an on-going exploration of the Scriptures, though their commitment to taking risk and seeking out the lost were priorities drawn from the Scriptures. However, for reasons that have been explained, church C failed to reach the ecclesiastical minimum to be rightly regarded as a church. They did not hold worship services and had not yet addressed issues of inclusion, initiation, and membership or considered how power might be shared with others. But, none of the other three churches had adopted the historic Baptist position either. Church A and church B relied on voting rather than attempting to discern together the mind of God through prayerful study of the Scriptures. Both churches decided to adopt an inclusive approach which put priority on an individual's commitment to the community, and did not distinguish between people on the basis of baptism, age, or even faith. This is concerning. The lack of a membership

¹²³ The participant explained that this was the question that the church community consistently wrestled with. The participant chose to speak of God in the masculine.

process, one that recognises the need for individuals to submit their lives to Christ and to commit themselves to the community of faith, means that those who are making decisions in these churches are not only those who have declared their faith in Christ as evidenced in baptism, but also those who attend church for other reasons. It is a departure from the believer's church model. Young children and those who do not necessarily identify as Christian are all included in the decision making process which begs the question 'what is the guiding ethos by which these people are making their decisions?' Further, if the role of the church in the mission of God is to be a community of believers who live in the power of the Spirit as a foretaste of the eschatological kingdom, then what is the effect when a church is unwilling to claim this as their identity as evidenced by their unwillingness to make any distinction between believer and unbeliever? It would be to each church's advantage consider the means by which individuals and households might express their commitment to God and to the church community in ways that are age appropriate and on-going without undermining the significance of baptism as a one-time expression of faith.

By contrast, church D maintained a theocentric approach. Leaders engaged the church in a process of collective discernment that consistently referred people to God and God's call on their lives, and was dependent on healthy communication among church members rather than votes. The church D interviewee was opposed to traditional forms of membership on the grounds that the process was tokenistic and said,

Membership is a have [meaningless]. In membership people become a member, receive the right hand of fellowship or whatever it is they do, and that's it. The only other voice they have is the AGM and the AGM turns in to an opportunity to complain. So we said, "Let's stay away from that!" So that's why we have the covenant and at our AGM you can't vote if you haven't signed the covenant and have tried to live that way of life for that year.

Rather than simply relying on baptism as the mark of the disciple, church D required on-going renewal of the baptismal commitment. This is consistent with the kind of radical discipleship that historically characterised Baptists who considered that if

someone was unwilling to commit themselves to God and to the faith community then they were not included in every aspect of church life. It also counters the intense individualism associated with believer's baptism by insisting that believers engage in life together.¹²⁴ Notice also the participant's contention that the AGM is the only place some members of other Baptist churches get a voice. That is undoubtedly true, and is a criticism associated with the adoption of the ministry led model. It is fair to say that in the wider Baptist community there is a mismatch between the theological demands of believers' church and the actual practice of corporate discernment which church D have sought to address. They have retained and even extended the radical edge of Baptist ecclesiology, holding together the *me* and *we* aspects of faith. It appears to be a successful model and one that works well for this small congregation living successfully without their own buildings. It will be interesting to see how this church evolves and how their collaborative discernment practices develop if the community becomes significantly larger.

¹²⁴ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 95.

Chapter 6 Conclusions

This project explored my thesis that these four churches had embraced an historic Baptist ecclesiology and recovered the radical edge that characterised the early Baptist movement. I now conclude that this is not so. Each of the four churches had moved away from the more conventional Baptist church paradigm by choosing to function without their own buildings, but this study showed that this did not necessarily result in a more missional or more radical stance. Interviewees were certainly more comfortable in these church communities than they had been in 'normal church,' but they had not progressed further than more conventional Baptist churches in clarifying their church's identity and purpose. I was concerned that interviewees did not recognise the value in corporate witness. I found it disturbing that the homogenous composition of their congregations and their invisibility within the community were not regarded as problems and as anathematic to the gospel because God's mission is expressed in visible diversity. It turned out that each of the four churches in this case study had a different interpretation of what it meant to engage in mission as church and all four had departed from an historic Baptist ecclesiology to a greater or lesser degree.

Unresolved Issues of Identity

I said at the outset that Baptists are fuzzy on issues of identity and that this can be attributed to a lack of awareness of their heritage and the theological grounds for the baptistic vision of church life. It became clear that two of the four churches, churches B and C, were not aware of the distinctive features of a Baptist ecclesiology beyond the autonomy of the local congregation; they failed to recognise the resources within their heritage that had significance for each church's identity, decision making process and mission. As James McClendon warned, these groups easily fall prey to fashionable ideologies, lose their distinctiveness and so deprive the world of their witness.¹²⁵ It is my assessment that this has happened to churches B and C in different ways. Church B showed little commitment to being Baptist and preferred the fashionable but erroneous suggestion that church simply exists for its members and to cater to their needs, while church C's determination to connect with non-Christians meant that they oriented all their actions around non-believers needs and did not

¹²⁵ McClendon, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Ethics*, 26.

consider a believer's church gathering fitted within their model. These groups displayed opposite extremes with regard to church and mission, but shared the assumption that faith is an individual matter and personal preferences should be honoured. This is a long way from a Christ-centered worship gathering of believers bound to one another in covenant. Both approaches fail to appreciate that Christ speaks in and through the church and that believers are responsible to one another. Consequently both approaches reflect a departure from traditional Baptist ecclesiology.

Homogeneity is a Problem

The three churches that held a worship gathering were self-described as predominantly educated, white, generation Xers. Although McGavran's homogenous unit principle suggests that people are more comfortable in groups with people who are like them and that such groups appeal to others of similar age, race, and social status, these churches were not flourishing. It was noted that all four churches were small, and churches A, B and D had reduced in size over time, and sadly church A has now closed.¹²⁶ Although numerical growth or decline is not always indicative of church health, it is reasonable to infer that homogenous groups are by definition exclusive. Each of these churches was composed of people with a lot in common. That fact alone may explain why interviewees felt more comfortable in these churches than in more diverse church communities. It also makes it likely that those who do not fit the Gen X demographic mould would find it difficult to join in. Theologically speaking, the homogeneity of these churches failed to represent the effect of the gospel on relationships with those who are different from one another. It could also be that the characteristics that define generation X, or any one generation, actually undermine the health of a church community. The tensions and conflicts between the needs and perspectives of people from different generations may actually have an invigorating effect on church community life as well as modeling kingdom life. It would be interesting to research this and to explore this possibility in more detail. The fact that none of the interviewees regarded the homogeneity of their group as an issue to be addressed is evidence of failure to grapple with the call to extend hospitality to outsiders, and to consider the needs of

¹²⁶ As has been described, church C did not hold a public worship gathering.

those who are different. Interviewees saw the church's mission in terms of the needs of their congregation. One interviewee from church A spoke of the need to focus on providing a church home for stage four Christians. Interviewees from B described the need to move past their work and faith focus to address the needs of the children who were attending. The interviewee from church D explained that they were united in their desire to figure out ways to live as Christ's disciples in contemporary urban society which involved expression of kindness and generosity to those outside the church. The interviewees viewed the homogeneity of each congregation positively and uncritically. This is a limited view of mission rather than one that is more edgy and expansive than a traditional Baptist church paradigm.

Invisibility is Not an Option

It became apparent that the buildings in which each church gathered did influence that church's development and identity. In fact, for churches A and B the lack of a designated church building was a stressor that acted against both churches' stated reasons for being and undermined it. For church A, possession of a building could have provided a context for hospitality and community focused outreach, and could have ensured that artistic worship installations existed for more than a few hours. And church B could have continued to explore more diverse forms of corporate worship given greater access to buildings. Interviewees from churches A, B and D confirmed that buildings cannot be regarded as neutral, passive, spaces that may be readily adapted to the church's purpose. Issues of access and architecture shaped the behavior of the church. However, it must also be kept in mind that all four groups chose to function without their own designated church buildings, and while there are many ways that a church might become visible and connected to their local community without the need for a building, it became apparent that neither church B, church C, nor church D was ultimately interested in being visible to their communities. Interviewees from church B explained that it had not been necessary to be visible to outsiders because the church existed to resource those who were already connected in. Members of church C and church D had created trusts that were visible in their communities but they were not interested in being known as a church or a group of Christians. Both charitable trusts had a significant public profile but the existence of the church, or Christians as the visionaries behind these trusts, was intentionally masked. Interviewees from both these groups thought it more

important that individuals made personal connections through the work of their trust rather than advertise the existence of the church collective. There was an open invitation for people to join in both trust's community projects. For example, church D promoted their activities widely through their website and invited anyone and everyone to participate physically or financially. It could be argued that the website provided enduring visual evidence of the existence of this group of people. It provided a vehicle for communication between those already involved, but it is significant that they chose not to identify themselves as Christian or as church.

Visibility is associated with being accessible for newcomers. Church groups are Christ's witnesses, called to be hospitable to strangers, the fearful, the disabled, and the isolated, as McClendon pointed out.¹²⁷ The church is the sign and site of God's presence in God's people and a foretaste of the eschatological kingdom. Consequently invisibility is neither desirable nor justifiable. So if a church decides to do without their own designated buildings then it is imperative that they give consideration to the ways that they might bear visible witness in their community and express hospitality to outsiders, not only as individuals but as a Christian community.

Participants from church C and church D felt that there were benefits in not being identified as Christians or as a church group. They could circumvent negative attitudes towards Christianity and win people over through friendship and good deeds. This suggests that there was some shame associated with being identified as Christian or as a church group, and with good reason given the mottled history of the church and the scandals that have hit the headlines in recent years. It is clear that these interviewees have not found a way to reconcile the Church's calling to make visible God's kingdom with the obvious imperfection and messiness that is inherent in church life.

Baptist Issues

As has been discussed, within a baptistic vision the church is a visible community of baptised believers who are consciously joined to God and to each other in covenant

¹²⁷ McClendon, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: Doctrine*, 414-415.

at a particular location.¹²⁸ During interviews, issues around church membership emerged that were not directly related to the presence or absence of church buildings. These four churches have had to figure out how membership is expressed in their context in common with all Baptist churches. Within the traditional Baptist church paradigm membership was associated with adult believer baptism. Church A and church D had recognised the need to nurture covenantal bonds between church members and came to the conclusion that baptism was not enough; a once and for all commitment to follow Christ did not, in their experience, translate in to a commitment to church, mission, and Christian community. Consequently, they created additional means by which church members could pledge themselves to be involved in church life and to serve one another for the next year. This is reminiscent of the first English Separatists commitment to walk together with God and God's ways as they were made known among them, and to appreciate that this involves some sacrifice. The introduction of an annual renewable commitment sits well within other church traditions where a renewal of baptismal promises is a feature of many Easter services, but ironically this has not been a Baptist tradition. All Baptist churches must grapple with what it means to belong to a particular congregation and the responsibilities associated with church membership. The introduction of the covenant by these two churches seems wise, but I am left wondering how those who have pledged themselves to Christ, as evidenced in baptism, have come to regard commitment to the church and to other believers as options unrelated to the decision to follow Christ. This is another avenue worthy of further research. I suspect that highly individualistic presentations of the gospel have contributed to the false impression that Christian faith is only personal and individual and that commitment to the local church is a matter of preference.

It was apparent that churches A, B and D were looking for meaningful ways to include children in church life. Church A in particular encouraged children to join in the annual commitment ceremony, church meetings and voting. I would argue that the desire to include children in the life of the church is laudable and in keeping with the demands of the gospel, but to bestow all the responsibilities and privileges of baptised adult believers on those who have not reached maturity and/or those who

¹²⁸ See Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 29; Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 137; Wright, *Free Church Free State*, 18-19.

have not made a commitment to follow Christ undermines the believer's church model. The reluctance of churches A and B to associate membership with conversion, baptism and commitment to radical discipleship is evidence that the believers church model is either not well understood or not valued. There are some issues here for all Baptists to reflect upon. If the believer's church model is to be upheld then there is an obvious need to develop some boundaries around the degree to which the young and/or non-believers can participate, and to make clear how a deepening commitment to Christ might be expressed. This assumes that there is a desire to uphold the believer's church model, which may not be so. The inclusion of children and adults who have not been baptised in all aspects of church life may actually reflect a move away from the believer's church model in favour of other non-Baptist church traditions. If that is so then the question to answer is whether this movement is deliberate and intentional or has occurred passively because of ignorance of traditional Baptist ecclesiology coupled with changes in the status of children within society. Given that many Baptists are unaware of their history and distinguishing features I suspect the move away from the believer's church model has happened without theological reflection.

As Baptist ecclesiology continues to evolve it is my conviction that present day Baptists need to be aware of their heritage and have a theological grounding for the decisions they make about their shared life and their role in God's mission. The churches that participated in this project are vulnerable groups due to their small size and their choice to remain invisible in their neighbourhoods. Rather than being more radical it would seem that these Baptists are simply grappling with what it means to be a church in New Zealand at this time. The issues that have been identified concerning membership and governance are not limited to churches that lack a permanent physical presence in their neighbourhood. These issues are associated with broader social trends but nevertheless they challenge a Baptist ecclesiology. It is my conclusion that the Baptist way of being church is a believer's church, which means being engaged in corporate discernment and decision making as believers attempt to join in the work of God in the world. It involves a covenantal commitment to God and the church in all its glorious diversity. And the church is a gathered community of people who are visible in the neighbourhood, in which they exist, bearing witness to God's eternal kingdom in their worship and shared life. If this

inspiring vision of the church is to reach its full expression then a congregation that chooses to do without a building needs to think strategically and theologically about their identity, and how they will express mission and worship, and how they will visibly incarnate the kingdom of God. It is apparent that there is a need to provide a reasonable defense for the visibility of the local church in the community. It is also apparent that there is a need to address the negativity associated with being church and being Christian. These negative associations are evident inside and outside the bounds of the church.

And finally, buildings, or the lack of them, contribute to a church's identity. A church building can provide resources that are helpful to mission and worship, but it is my conclusion that effective mission and vital witness may be achieved without them where there is a will to engage strategically and theologically with issues of Baptist identity and calling. In particular, members of Baptist churches that choose to function without church buildings need to explore ways that they might take the initiative to bear collective visible witness within their local community, rather than remain invisible, and to express their shared life in Christ in ways that make it possible for others to respond to God's call and to join in. The choice to break away from the traditional paradigm must be undertaken with careful consideration of the elements of Baptist identity and ecclesiology that are indispensable and those that may be relinquished. Within a Baptist ecclesiology, commitments to radical expressions of discipleship and to engaging in corporate mission are to be regarded as indispensable.

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Appendix 1 – Questions for Participants

1. What do you consider to be the freedoms leaders of churches without buildings experience? (Follow up questions: Can you give examples? How has the church responded to these?)
2. What do you consider to be the limitations leaders of churches without buildings experience? (Follow up questions: Can you give examples? How has the church responded to these?)
3. What attitudes or values come in to play for leaders of churches without designated buildings?
4. In what ways do you think that being building-less has shaped your understanding of God's mission in the world?
5. In what ways has being building-less shaped the church's missional identity?
6. What theological or biblical principles do you think undergird this model of church?
7. In what ways has being 'Baptist' influenced the shape of this church?
8. In what ways has being 'Baptist' shaped your understanding of what it means to be church?
9. In light of your experiences, how has the absence of church buildings shaped and informed your leadership?