

5 *From Lamb of God to dead sheep: The history of ideas*

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The Mission Theological Advisory Group

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Preface

In 1992, Canon (now Bishop) John Finney published the results of a study concerning British people who had made a recent public profession of the Christian faith. This book, *Finding Faith Today*,¹ was the result of research into how people come to faith in Jesus Christ and how they journey into becoming active members of the Church. Some of the conclusions of that study were particularly interesting to those engaged in mission and evangelism. For example, it can take quite some time to become a Christian, and friends and family may have more influence over a person's decision to join the Church than the impact of the big evangelistic rallies.

Finding Faith Today, however, drew on the stories of people who had both come to faith and joined the Church. This left open a whole set of other questions. What happens to people who search for faith, who travel on their spiritual journey, who encounter the gospel of Jesus Christ and who do not join the Church? What, then, are the barriers to belief? What of people who hear the gospel and cannot or will not believe it? What of those who encounter the Christian message and respond, but balk at the idea of becoming a Church member? What of those whose faith journey leads them away from the gospel? What of those who feel that in a maze of choices, the truth they opt for cannot be the Christian truth they are offered? Are these people somehow intrinsically different from those whose stories John Finney told, or is it that they were just not lucky enough to be shown the gaps in the barrier?

We decided that these questions needed looking at with urgency and in humility. For the people who test and reject the Christian faith indict the Church particularly in terms of its ability to promote the mission of God's love to the world. There *might* be barriers which keep people out, but there might also be barriers which keep us *in*, preventing us, as Christians, from acting in mission. We had to be prepared, at the outset, to show that many barriers might be of our own making.

For this reason, we have replaced any formal introduction to our work with a letter from a fictional angry person. This letter is an amalgam of some of the views we ourselves have encountered, and which reflect on us, as

Christians, for not looking at ourselves critically enough. These views are also contained in five sections which preface the introduction to each chapter. These sections are drawn from genuine discussions with real people who commute from Essex into London.

Our response to them and to the angry letter forms the body of the work, which examines both the search for faith and the witness of the Church. We decided that we would investigate aspects of the faith journey to see where difficulties might lie, and at the same time ask if what we were learning showed that the way the Church acts in mission in the closing years of the twentieth century was contributing to these difficulties. We had to ask whether our assumptions and presuppositions about how people come to faith were outdated or lacking and whether our theology and apologetics were sufficiently developed to prevent the gospel appearing outdated or anachronistic. Our conclusion forms our own reply to the substance of the introductory letter.

In the body of the work we agreed to investigate five of the areas of modern life which in some way or other affect every person in this post-industrial, technologically oriented, and free-market-driven western society. In doing so, we resolved not to spend all our time discussing the possible ills and wrongs of our society, but to try to see how our western culture challenges us and how we might respond to that challenge. The five areas we have studied are, we think, crucial to all engaged in mission. They are: how people belong to each other and to organisations; the characteristics of implicit religion; the shapes and forms of contemporary spirituality; how science, technology and Christian faith can co-exist; and our heritage of thought and ideas.

Our methodology was to invite people working in these areas to come and challenge our thinking on these issues. Through this process we have had to look at ourselves through others' eyes and ask ourselves hard questions. A consequence of this is that we have faced these challenges together as an ecumenical group in a spirit of unity, for these challenges are common to the Christian Church as a whole. We have consulted a wide range of people, including academics, ministers, teachers, lay workers, practitioners of mission and evangelism, ordinary church-goers and non-church-goers in the process of developing this text.

For this reason, this report is also divided into sections and there are a number of different ways of reading and using it. Each chapter forms a discrete segment of the book and may be used on its own. The main text of each we hope will be of interest to pastors, teachers, academics and anyone with a professional interest. An introduction and summary of each chapter are also provided for readers who want to pick out the main points without the detail. Key words are provided for those who want to pick up on a particular area. Leaders of discussion groups or other local church gatherings may wish to use these as background material. In addition, we provide discussion starters and things to do based on the subject matter for use with church groups or other groups. We hope, therefore, that this report will not just sit on a bookshelf, but be divided up and used in a variety of ways and that the various ways of reading it will enhance each other. In particular, we hope that this report will only be the beginning of a process which allows twenty-first-century Christians to forge stronger bonds between the search for faith and the witness of the Church.

+ Michael Roffen

Note

1. John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How Does it Happen?*, British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992.

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The Revd Canon Dr Edward Bailey, Network for the Study of Implicit Religion

The Revd Dr Fraser Watts, Starbridge Lecturer in Theology and Natural Science, University of Cambridge

Professor Nicholas Dent, Professor of Philosophy, University of Birmingham.

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Biblical quotations have been taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Introduction

A letter from Mrs V. Angry

Dear Mission Theological Advisory Group,

To be perfectly honest, it makes my heart sink to hear that another church body is producing yet another report on why people don't go to church. Everyone out here in the real world knows full well that the Church is years out of date. You lot don't have any clue about the kind of lives we lead, or the kind of faith we hold; you're only interested if we come in through those big heavy doors and do it your way. Yet you seem to think that if you spend a lot of time sitting round a table agreeing what our problems are, we'll all suddenly get up and start flocking into your churches – and putting money in the plate – after all, that's what it's all about, isn't it? Well, you won't find me in your cosy club – I work on Sundays!

So what good is all this advice on 'mission' going to do anyway? And just what do you mean by 'mission'? To most of us, your mission is the same as missionaries, giving Bibles to faraway tribespeople and telling them about Jesus whether they're interested or not. I suppose you'll be saying that Britain needs missionaries next! The best missionary I know is my friend, Val, next door. She may not spend every minute of her free time down the church, but she stood up for the young people when their biking area was about to be closed down. You should have heard her. She really made people think, made them look at what they were doing. I reckon Val's got a lot more in common with Jesus than the people who turned up on my doorstep the other day, asking me if I was saved and suggesting I get down to the church. They said they were evangelists. So what? My kids' tea ended up burning under the grill!

So tell me, what do these evangelists have to do with your 'mission'? And where in all this does the 'witness of the Church' come? Pretty funny witness if you don't practise what you preach: you should have seen the looks I got last time I was in church – so much for Christian love!

It's fine for you, you've got the whole story and you're so smug about it. You don't stop to put yourselves in the place of people who are struggling with questions about God, faith and religion. When I persuaded my daughter to

see the minister about my granddaughter's christening, she came back in tears saying the kid couldn't be done without her going to church and swallowing a lot of mumbo jumbo she couldn't understand. She tried, all right, but she's miles behind. She didn't learn any of that stuff in school, you know. We're Christians too though, just not your sort. It's not fair, and it makes me angry. You write as if you've got a hot line to God and a monopoly on souls. Well, I've got my God and I'm not going to join up and toe the party line just to please you lot. Why should I? My search for faith is mine alone and I don't need some group to tell me how to go about it.

Suppose I did decide one day to go to one of your churches? Where should I go – to the place with all the singing and praying and falling about or to the smells and bells and bobbing up and down? Or should I just go to the Church of England? I see all you lot come from different churches and it's too much to hope you might have agreed on anything.

It's a pretty rotten world sometimes, but I've got my hopes and dreams and I don't see why they should all have to be taken over by your religion. And when I die, I've got my ideas about that too. Why should you always assume that I've got it all wrong? Why don't you ever shut up for a bit and find out what's really going on in people's hearts and minds?

What I want to see from a book like yours is a real attempt to listen to people like me and then to get my kind of view across to the people in your churches. Make them think about this wonderful 'witness' of yours. What's it worth to me and all the people like me? That would be a 'mission' if you like.

So, how about it?

Yours sincerely,

V. Angry (Mrs)

1

Who goes there?

My name's Jim. I've got a good job in the City. I'm well off: I have a flat and a country house I only use at weekends. At home, I have an electronic office. I send and receive by fax/modem. I surf the Net. I send e-mail. I talk to hundreds of people I've never met and would pass in the street. I'm a networker. I like having choices, like finding a new car that's just right for me. I like looking at brochures, and I belong to lots of societies and get all the glossy mags. It's good to talk and good to belong. But as for walking into a church, forget it! All those people murmuring! All that community-singing stuff! It's years out of date. I live life in the fast lane. It doesn't fit my lifestyle. Maybe I'll want it when I'm an OAP and start thinking about dying. But I can't belong to an outfit like your Church, no way!

Introduction

In this chapter, we try to show that God's mission to people living in our society today is faced by various challenges. In particular, we look at changes: how people express their belief and how they belong to groups, networks and organisations. We seek to show further that some of the most contemporary sociological studies find our traditional thinking about community to be out of date and that people relate to each other in ways for which the Church is unprepared. Consequently, the Church may not learn to change fast enough, but may continue to promote models of believing and belonging which are no longer appropriate for those people who are searching for faith. We look into this challenge, first to investigate what sociologists are telling us and then to discover what the Church can learn. The areas which we address are particularly belonging, relationships and community. These three areas require us to look at corresponding theological areas. So when we consider belonging, we look at what the Church teaches in baptism, and at the notion of a covenant relationship with God. We have to consider what kinds of relationship are important today and how we understand what is taught to us by the doctrine of the Trinity. When we consider belonging and community, we also have to consider our ideas of fellowship, of koinonia, in terms of what it means for us to

be the Body of Christ. As we do this, we try to see what this implies for mission, as we go about our task of helping people come into contact with the gospel effectively in today's world.

How people belong: some challenges to the Church

Statistics and studies

Two thirds of the nation believes in God but few go to church or believe that religion is important, according to a survey to be published next week. Most said that the various Churches were out of touch with their lives and problems and more than half said that there should be a female Pope. (*The Times*, 13 October 1995, Study for BBC Radio 2's World of Faith Week)

1.1 Radio 2 and female Popes aside, most statistical studies show that the level of 'believing' in western (including British) society remains relatively high.

British society, like the majority of west European societies, is characterised by relatively high levels of religious belief, but low levels of religious practice, a situation inaccurately described by the adjective secular. This combination of believing and belonging (a convenient shorthand) should not be taken for granted If belief persists, though increasingly detached from its institutional moorings, it begins inevitably to drift away from anything which might be called orthodoxy Indeed I would argue that this drifting of belief away from mainline Christian teaching is a considerably greater challenge to the contemporary church than the supposedly secular nature of the society in which we live.¹

1.2 This implies that people tend to answer 'yes' to the question 'Do you believe in God?' and 'yes' to the question 'Do you pray?'² This shows that the majority of people have some experience of the transcendent, or have 'spiritual' experiences which lead them to understand a connection between themselves and some 'other'. More specific questions about the nature of God and God's relation to human beings lead to more diverse answers. For example:

Do you believe in a God who can change the course of events on earth?

No, just the ordinary one.³

1.3 This response tells us that while very basic and undeveloped forms of belief remain high, the level of support for much more specific theological ideas of traditional Christian teaching, such as the divinity of Christ, is much lower. This is an important distinction, for it suggests that the possibilities for development of a mature Christian understanding are dependent on the level of belonging to a church. If a developed theological viewpoint is only possible through such belonging, then this has implications for our understanding not only of contemporary spirituality (see Chapter 3), but also of the general effect on people of a decline in church-going practice. The Christian community draws its *raison d'être* from the existence of God's mission, so the churches must consider the state of the foundational worshipping Christian communities as well as the evidence for generalised external Christian belief.

1.4 The people examined in such studies may belong to any Christian denomination or none, or to another of the main religious traditions, or indeed, to a new religious movement (NRM). They may also express themselves through other forms of spirituality such as 'new age'. Despite these various backgrounds, the evidence suggests that there remains a high level of generalised Christian belief in what has been a traditionally Christian country, but which is now a plural society. This plurality also means that such generalised belief may incorporate other non-Christian religious notions, such as belief in reincarnation.

1.5 The same statistical evidence also suggests that the level of belonging to the Church, defined as being a practising member of a denomination of the Christian Church, is falling away from the level of generalised belief.⁴ If this is true, then it indicates that people who are searching for faith, who perhaps already believe and pray to a God, do not come to locate their awakening faith within the institution of the Church, but remain outside, working it out for themselves. It should be noted, however, that some sociologists argue that there is undifferentiated decline both in believing and belonging. Others working with churchgoing data, such as Professor Robin Gill, would argue that the notion of the 'empty church' has as much to do historically with

competitive building of large churches as to do with any statistical drop in numbers.⁵ Also, such a decline is common to other forms of voluntary associations and is not peculiar to the Church.

1.6 Further, a tendency to immature or generalised belief may be characterised by a largely sympathetic attitude towards religious matters, and towards the Church and its institutions. For example, this general affirmation of the Church is indicated by the hurt and indignation felt by some people who have been refused baptism for their child, for whatever reason. On the other hand, in systematic pastoral visiting, it is unusual to encounter complete rejection, even if those visited would never dream of going to church. Indeed, many people wish the minister would visit them in their own homes more often. It is interesting that, given the decline in committed Christian practice, surprisingly few people have chosen not to believe, or completely to reject the Church. On the whole people do not opt for rational alternatives, but for what Grace Davie characterises as 'drifting belief'.

1.7 This implies that people do retain a strong sense of *identification* with religious life and belief but this is not matched at the level of *participation*. This emerges strongly at times of national disaster or mourning, such as at Hillsborough, or Dunblane. Conversely, it may also emerge in the maternity ward. These are times when people say what normally they keep to themselves, and often need to call on God, to express grief, or love and thanks. Paul Handley wrote in the *Independent* that the birth of his daughter made him suddenly think about mortality and death: 'her skull is so crushable: the proof of life's fragility is in my hands'. But this was not mere morbid thought, but a recognition of the importance of faith: 'Knowing, suddenly, that everybody is finite increases the desire to care for them while they are still within reach. At such a time, faith becomes more important, with at the heart of it, a murdered god.'

1.8 In *The Millstone*, Margaret Drabble's character Rosamund expresses this need when her new-born baby has to have an operation:

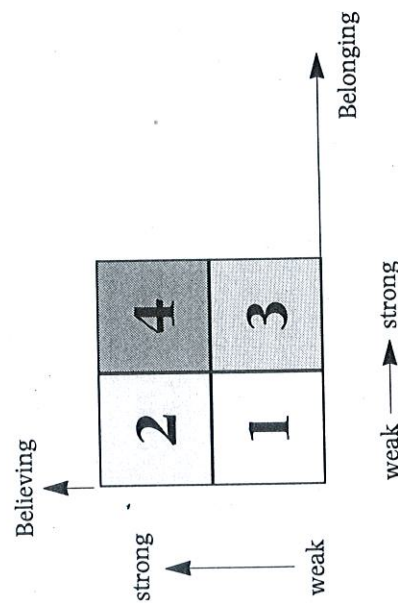
the subject of God did not much cross my mind, for I had never given it much thought, having been brought up a good Fabian rationalist, and notions such as the after-life and heaven seem to me crude quite literally beyond belief In the morning, when it was time to get up and get dressed and gather together

her pitifully small requirements, I got out of bed and got down on my knees and said, Oh God, let her survive, let her live, let her be all right, and God was created by my need perhaps.⁷

1.9 There is an assumption here, however, which must be looked at before we proceed, which is that believing somehow precedes belonging. If we look at the history of sociology, we can see that sociological thought has indicated that the relationship between believing and belonging is far from straightforward. For example, if belonging determines belief: categories of thought and feeling must originate in groups, and, indeed, there are current advocates of this idea, but there is also the notion that belief determines belonging: the model of the world that a person holds influences the group to which that person belongs.

1.10 It is important not to forget that today it is personal choices which underlie the fabric of modern society. Some American sociologists are suggesting that belonging is seen to rest with the individual's strength of commitment through choices, not collective decisions. The importance of how people see commitment in their lives today cannot be underestimated. Because the conflict between these views about believing and belonging may be unhelpful, it is perhaps better to discuss the *interaction* between believing and belonging in terms of the consequences for the mission of the Church. It is the tension between these two which will be examined in the rest of this chapter.

Figure 1 The interaction between believing and belonging



1.1.3 Thus there may be many believers outside the institution of Church and many disbelievers making up the actual membership. This means that there are diffuse boundaries: the perceived understanding of the community of the faithful is not determined by the size of a congregation. Gill also argues that a conversion experience or strong recognition of belief is not always the prime reason for beginning churchgoing. People may enter casually or speculatively through the permeable boundaries of 1, 2 and 3 although they may be more likely to enter 4 after a definitive experience of being 'baptised in the Spirit' or 'born again'.

1.1.4 We should also remember that there are similar interactions between believing and belonging in other faith traditions in western Europe. In some faith traditions, commitment begins at home. It is clear, for example, that if a person is born into, say, an Islamic or Orthodox Jewish community in this country, that person 'belongs' to the community of that faith tradition, and will probably be expected to observe its religious practices and to marry and raise children within the tradition. In order *not* to belong to the tradition, such a person would have to 'opt out' of the belonging, and perhaps accept exile from the faith community. That person might retain a personal faith, but be unable to express that faith with the rest of the community. Often such people are required to live effectively in two worlds. It is apparent, then, that there are different interactions in relationships between believing and belonging, but what questions does this pose for the Christian churches when we look at the important points of contact: baptism, marriage, adult profession of faith, and funerals?

Christian initiation

1.1.5 The document *Christian Initiation and Church Membership* makes a number of important distinctions about belonging. It says:

Belonging denotes actual, experienced participation in the life of a Christian community. It pertains to the individual's sense of identity with that community and its life of faith. It also pertains to the community's perception and recognition of the individual's involvement in its life.⁹

1.1.6 The document goes on to distinguish three types of belonging: informal belonging in which a person is not a recognised 'member'. Formal

1.1.1 In the diagram on page 5, the strength of interaction between believing and belonging is shown by the relative darkness of the area. In number 4, the church is characterised by strong belief and commitment, a successful body, but also with rigid and closed boundaries. The mission of that church (which acts against the direction of the arrow) has to make more effort to draw itself away from the strength of its fellowship, perhaps resulting in a church plant which effectively weakens the parent church, making it look more like 2 or 3. In 1, both belief and commitment weakly interact, a struggling church, which lacks the heart of commitment to reach out to people and keep them, even if its boundaries are particularly permeable. Thus 2 and 3 may be the kinds of church which have the most mission opportunity, because the commitment (whether biased to belief or belonging) is there, but the boundaries are permeable. Such a church has the ability to reach out in mission to those outside it. Each of these kinds of situation has different mission opportunities and congregations may change their interactions in the course of their history. In considering the importance of the balance of interaction between believing and belonging, we might here be reminded of Dr Colin Morris's words: 'You cannot preach the Gospel from the strong to the weak. You can only preach the Gospel from the weak to the strong.'⁸

1.1.2 The type of church suggested in 3 supports Robin Gill's argument that disbelief or agnosticism is seldom a reason for lapsing from church membership or attendance. This is shown by the following illustration:

John is in his seventies and on his own claim is an atheist, without in any way being aggressive about this. He is married to an active church member and has indicated to the parish minister that when he dies he would like the minister to take his funeral. His great joy is to be out walking on the roads and hills. He normally walks about twenty miles a day and is happiest when he is in contact with nature. Although an atheist, he helps regularly at church events, with children's outings and parties, with the disabled, and recently on a work party scraping, sanding and polishing church pews. In his bearing and attitude he is a good example of what a practising Christian might be. While he is neither a member nor a believer, he is certainly part of the fellowship at his local church.

belonging, in which membership is legally and constitutionally understood, and belonging as 'incorporation': that is 'the union of a person with Christ and therefore and thereby with Christ's people'. Baptism, then, has a more profound aspect than merely making informal membership formal: 'an individual is thereby constituted a "person" in the community of faith as a particular church understands it'. Clearly, the interaction between believing and belonging is important here.

1.17 If we look at the practice of infant baptism, we can see that the new child is welcomed as 'belonging' to the Christian community.¹⁰ This form of belonging, however, is related to the deeper theological significance of 'incorporation'. It is therefore a mission question how the Church helps people to understand 'belonging' in this spiritual way.

Baptism initiates the reality of the new life given in the midst of the present world. It gives participation in the community of the Holy Spirit. It is a sign of the Kingdom of God and of the life of the world to come.¹¹

1.18 The BCC document is properly concerned that, for some, baptism may appear as a static view of membership and not part of the further journey or becoming:

Sacramental initiation marks a definitive public stage in the total process of initiation and is ordered towards a fullness of life in Christ which seeks progressively greater living actualisation, first as the initiatory process continues and then in full witness and service.¹²

1.19 This further relationship of belonging and *becoming* is therefore an important part of the mission of the Church and something which needs to be offered to people, in simple terms, at the point of contact. For example, the Church of England ASB service currently says: 'Children who are too young to profess the Christian faith are baptised on the understanding that they are brought up as Christians within the family of the Church.'¹³

1.20 Baptism, however, is also dependent on profession of the Christian faith. Therefore a public profession of faith is required *before* the admission to the community of believing Christians. So it is that an adult, or a child old enough to understand is told: 'N, when you are baptised, you become a

member of a new family. God takes you for his own child, and all Christian people will be your brothers and sisters.'¹⁴

1.21 There is a distinction here between 'new' and 'old' modes of belonging, and new and old sets of relationships.¹⁵ In the Roman Catholic Church this includes abjuration of Satan and 'all his empty promises' and the Church of England is considering strengthening the abjurations in its baptismal liturgy. It is suggested that there be renunciation of 'the devil and all proud rebellion against God', 'the glamour and corruption of evil', and 'the sins that separate us from God and neighbour', before the declaration 'I turn to Christ'.¹⁶ This kind of language may suggest baptism as the fulcrum between that which is renounced, repented of and left behind and that which is entered into. This has implications for mission because mission theology describes a future into which we are all journeying which is characterised by becoming more and more like what is intended for us by God. The spiritual content of new belonging includes the adoption of a new moral order, the order of Christ's kingdom, which creates the context for God's new and final creation (*eschaton*). In this sense every baptism contributes to this forward-looking mission thinking and enhances it. Every family coming forward with a new baby therefore brings a new opportunity for proclaiming the mission of the Church. We may further extend this to say this is true of all the occasional offices.

Sacrament or passcard?

1.22 The question we have to ask here is: what is the difference between the Church's spiritual and pragmatic understanding? Do people perceive the theological significance of baptism, however dimly, or do they simply feel that baptism merely confers certain rights; in particular to call on the services of the minister for marriage in church, or for Christian burial, which was traditionally denied the unbaptised? For example: 'When Nicholas was 17, he pointed out that he wouldn't be able to have a white wedding because he hadn't been christened.'¹⁷ The questions posed by this as a pastoral problem are debated in this example:

[Michelle] and her fiancé plan to marry next year and ... she very much wants a church wedding. Their [incumbent], however, explained that they were not eligible, as neither of them

was baptised. 'I told him I'd be prepared to be baptised,' she said, 'but he replied that he felt that it would be for the wrong reason It seems so unfair that just because my mum didn't have me christened as a baby, my big day is going to be ruined.'

I ... wondered how I would have responded in her incumbent's shoes. I think I would have pursued her enquiry about baptism, which seemed genuine enough, and might have led her to a real encounter with the Christian faith. Who knows? Certainly in a country where half the babies born aren't baptised, this problem is going to become more and more common.¹⁸

1.23 Here, the example is based on false information. In the Church of England persons legitimately residing in a parish have the right to be married in the parish church.¹⁹ The incumbent was wrong in what he told Michelle. However, the story has an interesting outcome:

The determined couple – apparently undeterred by their experience – had approached the vicar of a neighbouring parish. After a chat with him, they had decided to try a spot of regular church-going – with ... excellent results. 'The service was very nice,' she said, 'not at all what we expected. There were lots of couples and families and children ... and we even got a free cup of coffee afterwards.' The upshot is that they plan to make this their church, and in due course, some time next year to be married there.²⁰

1.24 Here we may say that Michelle's first steps to belonging, through her desire for marriage, were resisted by the impermeable boundaries of the first church she approached, but encouraged by the more flexible boundaries of the second. In so doing, and by the particular contact of her marriage, the Church is given the opportunity to introduce her to the 'incorporation' which is spiritual analogue of her initial belonging.

1.25 What then of those who do not approach the boundaries at all? The Church finds itself challenged by those who choose to get married (if they get married at all) outside a place of worship or other religious setting. Exotic locations are particularly popular. Indeed, the *Sunday Telegraph* magazine of

7 January 1996 ran a fashion article called 'Brides on the Beach'. The implication of this article was that the perfect day includes sun, sea, a few yards of white material setting off a deep tan and the addition of the 'dream man', a seductive and skin-deep escapist fantasy which embeds marriage into an ephemeral holiday *apart* from real life. Many young people are attracted by this separation of holiday/real life, marriage/real relationship. With the changes in current legislation, marriages may now take place in hotels, country houses or other places offering a marriage 'package' and serviced by a registrar. This has implications for the opportunities open to the Church, which may for some be seen only to be competing to offer the best venue or environment for the big day. We may see a response to this in Church of Scotland practice: marriage may take place anywhere, for God is understood to be present and the Christian service is present. In this understanding, space for worship is created for the duration of the marriage service and the mission opportunity of introducing the couple to the spiritual implications of making vows before God is not compromised. What is made more difficult is the move from notional or peripheral belonging (as seen in Michelle's case) to a deeper commitment to a faith community worshipping in a particular place.

1.26 Believing and belonging, then, can come together at the point at which a public profession of Christian faith is made. In John Finney's study *Finding Faith Today*,²¹ we are able to learn much from those who have made a public profession of faith, but we are required in addition to ask what happens to those who have made a similar journey towards Christian faith, but who do *not* join the Church. It is these people who also have much to teach us. Finney indicated that the average length of time it takes to find and publicly profess faith, is four years,²² and we can learn from the ways in which the churches have adapted to the idea of extended spiritual journey, particularly in the Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). We also have to take into account those studies of faith development which suggest that a period of not belonging, a 'sabbatical', may actually represent an important stage in faith maturity. Preliminary research based on responses by those attending the 1994 ecumenical Lent project 'Have Another Look', suggests that 41 per cent of the respondents had stopped attending church at some time for at least a year.

1.27 What happens to people who are searching for faith on their own, or who perhaps join RCIA or other Christian basics courses such as those

provided by the Church Pastoral Aid Society (CPAS) or join 'Alpha' courses such as those run at Holy Trinity, Brompton, and yet do not end up as professed members of a particular denomination of the Christian Church?

1.28 Further, are there particular opportunities for the Church to offer genuine modes of belonging which do not fall within the usual expectations of process conversion?

Examples: some stories

In 1986, a young woman in her twenties living in Oxfordshire began to make plans for her wedding in June 1987. She read *Brides* magazine and followed its guidance for choosing dresses, flowers, cars, invitations, etc. In line with the emphasis on making the right choices for a perfect day, she visited some twelve churches of different denominations within a forty mile radius, looking at the possibilities for perfect pictures. When she found the church of her dreams, she went to the vicar and asked to fill in a banns form. When she was told that it was not possible to call her banns, she asked how she could qualify, and was told by residence, by membership of electoral roll or by Archbishop's licence. She chose to fulfil the residence requirements: the easiest minimal form of belonging. Her banns were called and she got her wish.

1.29 On the face of it, this story looks like cynical manipulation of the rules of the Church of England for individual and materialistic ends (compare David Winter's story, above). It is easy to dismiss the young woman's actions as being typically consumerist, driven by the need to make optimum choices. But we also have to ask what it was that drove her to search for the place in which to make one of the most important decisions of her life. What was she really looking for? The perfect setting can be created artificially if necessary. Was there a sense in which this search to belong to the 'right' place could be matched to an incipient desire to belong to the fellowship of Jesus? Are there mission opportunities in such an encounter?

A Yorkshire farmer never habitually attended church but it was traditionally understood that the local vicar would ask him to provide the stock of corn for the church at the time of

Harvest Festival. When a new incumbent was appointed, who was unaware of this tradition, the farmer was offended and upset that his traditional gift was not asked for and blamed the incumbent for this oversight.

1.30 At first glance, this seems like sheer unreasonableness on the part of the farmer, but if we look more carefully, we may see that it is all too easy to underestimate the strength of even this peripheral belonging. Here, the gift and reception of part of that person's livelihood in the symbolic form of the corn are the link to belonging, and when that belonging is undermined, a real distress may result. If we persist in seeing giving of self in terms of the body in the pew, we may overlook giving of self in ways which are none the less deeply meaningful for the giver.

1.31 A man who was an out-of-work boxer took to dropping in on the church's open morning. He was alcoholic and terminally ill with cancer and desired a reconciliation with his estranged daughter. Members of the church wrote to her, explaining the situation and finally she agreed to a meeting in a motorway café. Before this meeting the man came to church just once, arriving before the service for reassurance that he looked all right. The meeting went well and he died reconciled to his daughter. Susan Hope says of this man:

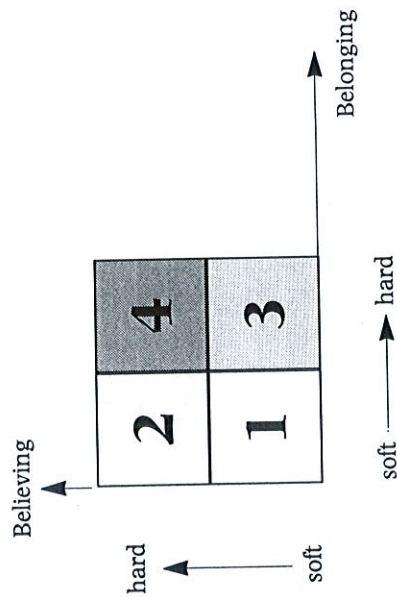
As far as I know, Terry never made a 'profession of faith'. He never came to a church service. But he was part of us, he 'belonged'. He was 'caught' in a loving network of relationships, he participated in the life of the Body through those relationships. This is not to set up 'relationships' as the way to salvation. But this is to affirm that there are many ways of believing, some of which involve 'participation', not mental assent to credal statements. Frequently 'belonging' precedes 'believing', is a part of believing, and Pauline theology is full of a happy confusion between what it is to be 'in Christ' and what it is to be 'in the Body'.²³

1.32 When we ponder this kind of story, we also have to remember the doubters in Jesus's time who belonged to the company, but who could not believe, and those who encountered Jesus whose lives were changed by him, but who did not enter the community which became his Church. How do those people inform our understanding of the relationship between believing

and belonging? Indeed, the sense of belonging may be very important for people where there is doubt or disillusion. It may also be important for those whose theological understanding is undeveloped (see above) and who begin at the level of trust. We may say that a missionary church will be itself a believing culture, even if it carries with it those who do not or who cannot believe.

1.33 In the diagram below, we can reconsider the interaction between believing and belonging in terms of the kinds of social, psychological and spiritual boundaries different kinds of churches create. Where there are 'soft' boundaries, there may very well be more entry points for the person searching for faith or for somewhere to belong. When we consider the people in our stories – Terry, John, Michelle, the farmer – we can see that their movement towards believing and belonging is helped by there not being a rigid barrier between the Church and the world. A 'strong' church is therefore not necessarily the most effective kind of missionary church. We shall examine later how strong churches and groups may be seen to be very successful in an age of decline, but yet not add so much to the Church's mission. In this sense they are churches of the now, prevailing against a fairly limited view of our society; they are not the churches of the future that we are challenged to become.

Figure 2 Facility of churches to be mission oriented



When I was at Durham I ran a very successful thing called Agnostics Anonymous for people who wanted to come along, no holds barred, no commitment, to have a drink, air their questions and their doubts, with no prayer, nothing religious at all, it was just a general free-for-all. It was highly successful: it never surprised me when people started to drift into the church and sit at the back and come and go. And what I long to see is a Church that is *open* to the community, so that people feel they *can* come on their own terms, and move away on their own terms too. That's how the Church ought to be.²⁴

1.34 If we look at such stories in detail, it is possible to see that the relationship between believing and belonging is extremely complex. Believing and belonging are not only related, but form part of the same sociological, anthropological and theological processes.

Scriptural models

1.35 We also have to take into account the idea that Christian belief may actually be *about* belonging. First, we cannot underestimate the biblical sense that people are created in the image of God (cf. Genesis 1.26) and thereby 'belong' to the Godhead. We can see this reflected particularly in the use of the personal pronoun. God speaks of 'my people' (e.g. Exodus 3.7; Leviticus 26.12; Jeremiah 12.16). Jesus says, 'Feed my lambs' (John 21.16). There is also a strong sense of 'keeping' and 'entrustment' between the Son and the Father, so Jesus says to God, 'I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me' (John 18.9). Part of the nature of God is the ability to keep, or to remember all human beings (cf. Genesis 8.1; Exodus 6.5; Psalm 105.8,42), so that, in an ancient image, those who sail in the ship of God's saving promises *cannot* be lost in the storms and rough seas of the world's troubles.

1.36 This important sense of belonging is made concrete in the idea of a covenant between God and human beings as in the case of the covenant with Noah (Genesis 9.8–17); with Abraham (Genesis chapters 15,17); the covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai (Exodus chapters 19,24); and with David (Psalm 89; Jeremiah 33.19–26). The idea of covenant is a powerful purveyor of confidence, community, purpose, promise and integrity. Where

covenant breaks down there is bewilderment, scattering, self-examination and lament. We can see this in Deuteronomy 29.24-25: 'they and indeed all the nations will wonder, "Why has the Lord done thus to this land? What caused this great display of anger?" They will conclude, "It is because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord."' (Cf. Psalm 78.37; Jeremiah 22.8-9; Zechariah 11.7-11.) In the Old Testament, the act of making a covenant confirms the sense of belonging, so that the Ark of the Covenant becomes a visual holy symbol of the mutual promise of belonging between God and his people (e.g. Exodus 25.10-22; Deuteronomy 10.1-11; 2 Samuel 6.1; 1 Kings 8.1-9), and circumcision becomes a symbol of belonging to the covenant. Genesis 17.11 says: 'You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you' (cf. Acts 7.8). Further, the covenant is exclusive: other tribes and clans cannot 'belong' to God in this way, and are marked out as 'other'. Even more important, the covenant is guaranteed and underwritten by other forms of belonging, in particular the governance of, or access to, land (cf. Genesis 12.1-3; 13.14-17; 28.13-15), 'a land flowing with milk and honey' in Deuteronomy 6.3; 11.9; 26.9, so that the Babylonian captivity and the Diaspora generate a terrible sense of dispossession and exile (e.g. Amos 7.17; Jeremiah 4.5ff.; 6.1ff.). While it is clear, as will be shown, that the idea of territoriality is no longer always appropriate in models of belonging, we should not perhaps ignore the psychological satisfactions of the covenant relationship. Further, an examination of the sense of being lost and the need for restoration might well provide the churches with information about how to reach those who search for faith but do not join the institution of the Church, or indeed any other religious institution.

1.37 When we consider the theological model of God's covenant with all of humanity and, indeed, with all creation, we have to ask how this relates to the New Covenant instituted by Jesus as well as to the kinds of covenants which some churches (and new religious movements) ask their members to enter into. In all of this, there is the question of criteria for belonging within or under the covenant. Who decides who belongs and who does not? If God is by nature inclusive, loving and merciful, what criteria exist for refusal?

1.38 This feeling is often expressed by people whose request for baptism of their child is refused, except on the 'condition' of attending church and/or receiving instruction. In particular, some people may feel that their new

child is being rejected as 'not good enough', or that their lifestyle is being criticised and used as a disqualification for their child. They may therefore see the idea of receiving instruction, not as help but as a trial. We may see such feelings as indicating the bewilderment some people experience when the Church attempts to 'rush' them from undeveloped to developed theological view through the entry point provided by the baptism request. The idea of the spiritual journey through which the love they experience for their new child is deepened and explored as the child grows may be the least complex entry point for many people encountering theological ideas for the first time.

1.39 Here, it might also help to remember that in the New Testament, Jesus calls the disciples into a fellowship which is not immediately contingent on exactly what or how they believe. It is worth noting that according to Mark 6.52 the disciples are utterly astonished when Jesus walks upon the sea 'for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened' (cf. also Mark 4.13, 40; 8.17-21). Moreover, John stresses that it is only after the resurrection that the disciples will fully understand (cf. John 12.16; 14.29). Indeed, the sense of belonging with Jesus is not undermined by their lack of faith or lack of understanding. As the sense of belonging is strengthened, so understanding grows until the disciples and Peter can acknowledge that the Rabbi, Master, Teacher is also friend and Lord and, indeed, the Christ (cf. John 6.69; Mark 8.27-30). Yet this same Peter, on whose rock the Church is founded (Matthew 16.18), is also the Peter who denied any sense of belonging with, or to, Christ (cf. Matthew 26.69-75; Mark 14.66-72; Luke 22.56-62; John 18.15-18, 25-27). According to the fourth Gospel, Peter's threefold denial of Jesus subsequently parallels his threefold confession of love for Jesus (John 21.15-19). The paradox of these pictures of Peter in the gospels may help us in forming an approach to how people believe and belong today.²⁵

1.40 The fellowship of the disciples with Jesus may be said to create the conditions under which the faith of the early Church is fostered. Under these circumstances, believing as a wholehearted commitment is conditional upon belonging as a nominal commitment. Obedience to the command to 'follow me' (e.g. Matthew 8.22; 9.9, 19-21; Mark 1.17; Luke 18.22; John 21.19) represents only one step on a continuing journey.

1.41 For these reasons, this chapter now looks at a number of different kinds of belonging which are current in modern society and considers the levels of commitment which may be associated with them.

Belonging to me

1.42 The most basic form of believing and belonging concerns the establishment of identity. 'What-ness', 'Who-ness' and 'Where-ness' are all necessary to a person who needs to make sense of being alive. The ability to state one's name and location is the first investigation in any neurological examination. However, some neurologists and psychologists also see the ability to establish identity as a prerequisite for spirituality and religious awareness. The neurologist Dr Oliver Sacks speaks of a profoundly amnesiac man as being 'de-souled' because the lack of memories of himself could not allow him to 'belong' to the present. Yet this man is entirely transformed at the eucharist:

I saw here an intensity and steadiness of attention and concentration that I had never seen before in him or conceived him capable of. I watched him kneel and take the Sacrament on his tongue, and could not doubt the fullness and totality of Communion, the perfect alignment of his spirit with the spirit of the Mass. Fully, intensely, quietly, in the quietude of absolute concentration and attention he entered and partook of the Holy Communion. He was wholly held, absorbed, by a feeling. There was no forgetting, no Korsakov's then, nor did it seem possible or imaginable that there should be; for he was no longer at the mercy of a faulty and fallible mechanism – that of meaningless sequences and memory traces – but was absorbed in an act, an act of his whole being, which carried feeling and meaning in an organic continuity and unity, a continuity and unity so seamless it could not permit any break.²⁶

1.43 We should also remember that when Jesus healed the man whose name was 'Legion', his healing was signalled by the recovery of identity, selfhood and religious awareness: he was 'clothed and in his right mind' (Luke 8.35).

1.44 This important sense of belonging to oneself gives a person the ability and authority to talk about 'I', and also to understand that no one else can be 'I'. Following Buber,²⁷ we can say that this in turn creates the conditions for relationship, for bonds and bridges to be established across boundaries to 'thou' (other human beings) and 'Thou' (God). This means that the giving of names is extremely important and so is location. We may see this exemplified in the status of the creation stories in Genesis (e.g. 1.5,8,10). We can also see this reflected in biblical examples of God calling individuals by name, such as in the call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3) and of Paul (Acts 9.4; 22.7; 26.14), and by encounters with God in sacred places, such as holy mountains (e.g. Exodus 3.1–6). The most primitive kind of belonging, then, is the establishment of an I–Thou relationship.

Individualisation

1.45 Today, however, we have to take into account new sociological processes. Together with the establishment of identity, it is also necessary to see the process of individualisation as being significant for believing and belonging. 'Individualism and secularisation are behaving like a pair of scissors, each of the two blades contributing to a situation in which moral choices are becoming individual choices.' This also means that 'Individualisation makes religious people more critical of the institutionalised aspects of religion and de-institutionalisation of religion will, in the long run, lead to a loss of religiosity.'²⁸

1.46 In today's society, then, the sense of self is sharpened by the process of individualisation to a point where individual experience and understanding are placed over against tradition and teaching. This is what is meant by 'individualisation'. It is important to understand that this is a critical stance which necessarily weakens belonging in terms of 'solidarity' with others, although the need to *rely* on others may actually become stronger. It is not actually possible to 'live my own life' without a high degree of dependence on what other people can provide. We will see in the contemporary spirituality chapter that New Age, alternative therapies and new social movements seem to appeal mainly to the most individualised people today. This means that the first assertion of the self may be that 'I am myself and I do not belong to anyone'. Alternatively, this may be extended into a monistic sense that

the self is (or can become) God. These views may also imply that such a person will also reject the Church where the Church is seen to wish to have a directive or dominating influence. The artist Stanley Spencer, for example, talked about the power of his individual artistic vision as 'the Church of me'.²⁹ For many people today who are nominally Christian, spiritual experience may be reduced to 'the Church of me'. However, as with Stanley Spencer, the 'Church of me' may contain rich and valuable insights into spirituality. What is the Church going to do about this? How can it use these insights?

1.47 Set against this, we have to consider how people behave in solitary confinement. For some people, such as those in prison, this is used as punishment. The deprivation of stimuli from others causes the sense of self to disintegrate. For example: 'My thoughts were frequently occupied by the loss of my humanity. What had I become? I walked the floor day after day, losing all sense of the man I had been, in half-trances recognizing nothing of myself.'³⁰ In other cases, such as hermits and solitaires, the isolation of self strengthens the power of the bond with God, but this is still dependent on the support of others in relationship:

Even Christian hermits, if they are to flourish, need not only the prayers of the community but also to be in some form of continuing relationship. If we take seriously our baptism as making us fellow members of the body of Christ, then it is not something to be pursued alone, but something to be received through mutual ministry, encouragement, fellowship and love.³¹

1.48 This raises the question of distinction between 'individual' and 'person', especially if we remember the point about baptism conferring personhood within the Body of Christ. Part of the process of 'individualisation' is the notion that people can in fact exist as individuals, without considering what is implied by personhood. In solitary confinement, the individual may survive, but the *person* may be severely affected by being deprived of relationship.

1.49 This poses a problem for the Church where the sense of self is measured against what we understand by 'God'. The 'I-Thou' opposition has a relational value, but some theologians, such as Alistair McFadyen, also see the sense of personhood being created, or 'sedimented', through the aggre-

gation of interpersonal relationships. In this case, the 'Thou' which is God is specifically the Triune God and this understanding of personhood in relationships is derived analogously from the theology of Trinity.³² There is a problem here, however, when we consider the existence of autistic people, who are unable to endure social contact or form relationships in the way we understand them.³³ A woman whose story is recounted in another of Dr Oliver Sacks's books gives her ontological perception to the title: she feels herself to be 'an anthropologist on Mars'.³⁴ None the less we may find it revealing that this lady, who from an early age was unable to bear her mother's touch, later built herself a machine, which, under her control, could simulate holding and cuddling her. Similarly, although she only believed in an impersonal or 'scientific' God, she was able to react intuitively to animals and to their behaviour.

1.50 From this, we may have to have a theology of mission that says we must recognise a fundamental self, which stands over against the personhood of sedimented relations. This fundamental self is both ontological and eschatological; it is part of our being when we come into existence and as we die. Further, this fundamental self has an urge to relationship; its existential condition is relational. The notion of belonging, then, is rooted in this urge to form relationships. Where people are unable to make inter-personal relationships, or where their lifestyle impedes this, we can infer that their notions of believing in a personal God and their notions of belonging, as to a Christian community, will be impaired. This kind of understanding will be developed, as it becomes crucial, in a later chapter.

1.51 It is clear that some of the processes of individualisation may well work against the idea of the person made in the image of a Triune God, and lead to the formation of a God-sense which is in fact antithetical to some understandings of Trinity. It is also not enough to proclaim the missionary God as one who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, without first creating contexts for people to receive this idea.³⁵ We can also see that the interaction between believing and belonging may be related to the sense of 'who I am'.

Post-materialism

1.52 Another question which arises from the process of individualisation, is whether post-materialism, the emphasis on quality of life, tends to bring

other generations. Here, we may consider the considerable importance of those grandmothers in the eastern bloc who nurtured the faith in private and passed on the Christian message to their grandchildren, keeping the faith of the community alive while religious practice was suppressed by the authorities.

1.55 It is also important to mention the significant role that women have traditionally had to play in this process. Even in times when the notion of family is changing, women, as the bearers of children, cannot be overlooked as the major influences in the religious lives of those closest to them. In *Finding Faith Today*, the biggest influence on men in finding faith was the influence of the spouse.³⁷ Here we may be wise to consider the openings provided by human relationships; especially those between women and men and women and children, where the experience of being loved provides openings for the Church to proclaim God's mission of love to the world.

1.56 The gender question is important, for it may be that women are in many roles able to talk about love and relationships more freely than men. The evangelisation of some men therefore also involves giving them an appropriate vocabulary and the permission to use it. Without this, the situation of some is seen to be tragic. Martin Robinson writes about some groups of working-class men for whom:

Just occasionally there seems to emerge the sense that there might be something more than the merely physical. It is almost as if the existential encounter of people with the world occasionally suggests a religious dimension, but a knowledge of how to express such feelings is absent. In any case, it is as if the emergence of such feelings must at all costs be denied and suppressed, kept so firmly within the realm of the private that such longings dare not be admitted even to those few people with whom one shares some intimacy – one's friends; one's lover, one's wife.

The picture that emerges is of people who are truly lost.³⁸

1.57 The importance of relationship breaking down these barriers of silence and lostness is, as has been shown above, incorporated in the baptism service, but it is also offered by some new religious movements in which a person is incorporated into a new family of loving relationships and sepa-

with it the idea that the individual will *always* be able to make choices in order to define 'who I am'. This affects even the most basic kinds of belonging, so that, for example, the Children Act now intends to put the interests of children and their wishes at a premium, meaning that under certain circumstances, children can 'divorce' their parents. There are more choices about belonging than ever before, and the emphasis on quality of life in a 'pick'n'mix'³⁶ society means that many opportunities for this arise in response to consumer demand. We can see this in the High Street, where there is a large range of, say, fast food restaurants, which all essentially offer the *same thing*. We can also see this in the different practices and therapies which constitute New Age.

Belonging to the family

1.53 The second important process of belonging is the formation of closely bonded relationships with other human beings to become members of a family. Underlying this, we have to recognise that the most important factor in human bonding is sexuality. Also, we may see reproduction and nurture as the historic basis of natural ordering. The Jewish *Kaddish* reminds us that 'with our lives we give life. Something of us can never die.' The sharing of name (and sharing of genes) fosters powerful bonds of association which in many societies extend out into clans and tribes. Traditionally, families were also closely located in a geographical area.

1.54 We may notice also the emphasis religions have put on the importance of the family, from the Christian example of the Holy Family to Orthodox Jewish insistence on the holiness of the family. While there may be segregation of the sexes in the synagogue, the mosque, or in churches, prayers and ritual actions at meals in the home may have a powerful bonding effect. The family is reminded that it belongs to each other and to God. We may also note that hospitality is closely related to embassy and is itself a part of mission. Jesus himself instituted the Eucharist in the Jewish Passover tradition, but even practising Christian families do not necessarily make their meal times referential of God. Indeed, in an age of TV dinners and microwaved snacks, the communal meal is impractical for many. None the less, the fact is often overlooked that the family represents a powerful missiological force, in the simple terms of handing down the message of faith to

rated from their original family where that family is outside the movement. Where this happens, belief and belonging are required to be synonymous and the adherent is required to make a choice for this, often to the great distress of the abandoned parents, brothers and sisters, husbands, wives or children.

1.58 However, we must now acknowledge that the nuclear family and its relationship networks are no longer the only appropriate model of 'family' in existence in western society.³⁹ Belonging is complicated by a greater number of relationship possibilities and by greater geographical distances between parts of the kinship network.⁴⁰

1.59 For example, Canon Peter Challen, formerly of South London Industrial Mission (SLIM) found it necessary to use in his own work the following definition of the family to describe its mode of belonging:

A family is a unit which endeavours to be stable, loving and caring; within which the value of each individual and entity is recognised and where the interaction of each member and each part builds and nurtures enhancing relationships and a developing and accepting interdependence.

1.60 He points out that this could include other family-like structures, for instance: the earth itself; the whole of humanity; a nation; a corporate team; a unit without blood ties; a local community; a tribe; a conventional or unconventional blood affinity; a legally registered family. This raises questions about where the boundaries between various groupings may lie, especially where these may be unclear but undoubtedly operational. Consequently, there is some caution to be exercised in talking about the 'church family' and its members, for the church community may or may not have the characteristics of a family. Sometimes where the term is used, it unhelpfully appears to exclude the contribution of single people.⁴¹ At the same time, the Church may properly have an important opportunity to be community or family to those with no family. The problem seems to arise when the Church formulates a model of family which is then forced on people, rather than encouraging people to find family-like networks which may better suit their needs. These might include youth groups, or mother and toddler groups, for example.

1.61 The process of individualisation may also give the individual more sense of choice in defining 'who is my family?' It is interesting in this respect that Jesus himself asks the question 'who is my family?' in relation to belonging. Not only does he ask this question directly in Matthew 12.48, but he also asserts his sense of belonging in the Temple, as over against the assumed bonds to his parents (Luke 2.48-49), and restores the sense of familial belonging, broken by his death, by giving the care of his mother to the beloved disciple (John 19.26-27). In this way, Jesus has something to say about priorities in belonging which point to right relationship between human beings and God.

Belonging to a community

1.62 In larger groupings we must differentiate between familial belonging and that of community. Traditionally, the idea of community was geographical or territorial: the immediate neighbourhood and the families living within it were most important to the notion of belonging: 'I am x and I come from y ...' Consequently, in some places, a communal model of religious life is most usually apparent. Everyone in the community sees the village church as 'their' church irrespective of their actual membership. This model, therefore, has particular ecumenical implications.

1.63 Further, in inner-city and developed areas, neighbourhoods may be much more difficult to define, except in ghettos and housing estates. Consequently, community groupings may occur on the basis of ethnic origin or through other networks, requiring churches which fulfil the function of responding to the conditions of entry. This vision of the Church which sees a movement from territory to network has been addressed in the context of church planting: 'many ... are asking for recognition that human life is lived in a complex array of networks and that the neighbourhoods where people reside may hold only a very minor loyalty.'⁴² This means that the Church must re-examine the whole notion of 'community'. For example, the Basic Christian Communities of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, together with the New Churches may show the Church how different kinds of community can nurture the faith in ways appropriate to particular contexts. The idea of 'community' as a dense, positively charged concept may in fact be unhelpful today.⁴³ and where this is so, we can see that it may well be the task of the Church to put people in touch with appropriate networks.

1.64 Another way in which the individual's sense of belonging is changing is in location and orientation. In today's western culture, the majority of people make use of transport and are familiar with planes, cars and ships enabling them to travel large distances in a relatively short time. This increased mobility blurs traditional ideas about 'belonging' to a particular place in common with all the other people who 'belong' there. A person may simply have a set of 'landmarks' which constitutes his or her belonging. These might include a house, an office, a leisure centre or club, and perhaps a church, all at some distance from one another. The different people encountered at each of these 'landmarks' might only have that one person in common. How, then, does the Church equip Christian people and those searching for Christian faith to see the church as the centre of their network of locations and to relate their spirituality to all these other landmarks? This is a significant mission question. For example, if you live in Southampton but work in London, how do you invite your colleague who is searching for faith, but who lives in Birmingham, to come to church with you? When John Finney has shown the importance of *relationship* in making faith commitments, this kind of question becomes acute.

1.65 There is also another important question about what role religion has to play in institutional life. The way that religious issues are reported or portrayed in the media, the way that religious festivals are respected (or not), the way public ceremonies include religious rituals, it might be that all this can come to represent the common religious denominator between the various aspects of a person's life.

Belonging in contemporary society

(1) CHOICE AND PARTICIPATION

1.66 The process of individualisation and the use of networks also mean that a person is exposed to possibilities of belonging which are not predetermined but offered as choices in the course of that person's lifetime. Contemporary society offers the possibility of choosing friends, one's marriage partner, and a whole series of societies, groups and networks which are representative of allegiances, interests and beliefs. The local social system is usually seen to be made up of overlapping networks, primarily those relating to education, leisure, kinship, politics, and trades union or other groups.

These create a 'network infrastructure' which have nodal points where they 'stack' or 'overlap'. Such networks may also be directly related to the important geographical landmarks, so where 'school' is one such landmark, the associated networks may include after-school activities or Parent Teacher Association. The identification of these nodal points may in fact be crucial for discovering where and at what times an individual may become susceptible to interest in joining a church. It is a challenge to the Church to have the notion put before it that individuals become receptive to outreach in mission through these networks. It is an indictment of the Church's activity, however, that receptive groups may be seen as the merely vulnerable by others. 'To target the vulnerable' is manifestly not the same as 'evangelising the receptive'. Here, then, we have to draw attention to the need in the Church to develop sensitivity in evangelism, and to draw a distinction between what is appropriate evangelistic activity within receptive groups and unacceptable proselytism.

1.67 The New Churches, for example, are good at using networks to gain access to people in receptive groups, such as young parents on housing estates. This form of approach is also, in fact, implied in *Breaking New Ground*, where a church plant of a particular type may be the most appropriate mission strategy in an underchurched housing estate.

1.68 We can also see this operating in very specialised areas. Some new religious movements are able to 'target' young people in institutions of Higher Education very successfully. Others, whose primary strategy involves 'walking the walk and talking the talk' are very effective at mobilising the network of friends at work in order to attract possible converts.

1.69 Joining networks, however, presupposes the exercise of membership, of participation. Being a supporter of a football team or of a pop star's fan club also presupposes the desire to attend football matches or pop concerts. Doing so strengthens loyalty and the bond of relationship not only with what is believed in (the club, or band) but with those others who share the common interest. But this phenomenon of the strong core group, with its powerful bond-making, is also declining in favour of the central interest being mediated through television, magazines, and other forms of marketing.

(II) CHOICE AND NON-PARTICIPATION

1.70 One of the most significant shifts in contemporary society is that of non-participatory belonging. That is to say, feelings of solidarity with the chosen society or group are reinforced not by contact or relationship with other human beings, but by other media. Therefore many people think it is perfectly possible to be a Christian by watching *Songs of Praise* and singing along with the hymns and may derive great pleasure from doing so. This phenomenon is also signalled by the rise in membership of correspondence organisations, from which people receive information and special items in their homes without direct participatory requirement. Typically, there is a core group of deeply committed and active members and a much larger group of non-participating members who simply read about the activities of the core group. Commitment is reflected only at the level of financial investment.

1.71 This loss of interactive behaviour is also present in other parts of life, such as mail-order shopping, banking by phone, and passing mail on the Internet, indicating feelings and emotions by little symbols (:-) (:-) (turn this page sideways). Quick, convenient, impersonal processes eat into traditional relationships with threatened loss of shared experience and oral tradition – something which advertising and television tend to exploit ('Get through to someone' and 'It's good to talk' are the slogans attached to BT advertisements). The mobile telephone promises instant access without the necessity for face-to-face encounter. Some tabloid newspapers exploit the lives of characters in soap operas, replacing actual community news with a focus on the common fiction beamed three or four times a week to every household. This represents a satisfaction with belonging at one remove, a peripheralising and isolation of individuals in the name of their own choices or convenience. Faith and belief are therefore isolated and less likely to be shaped or challenged in the common arena.

1.72 Consequently, if for many people life is no longer lived in intense face-to-face personal relationships, then the Church may have to ask itself whether the kind of worship it offers can accommodate such people. How does the Church provide for those who desire a distant, formal and self-protecting way of relating? Perhaps this means that those who attend a quiet service at 8.00 a.m. on a Sunday morning should be seen as Christians

whose church life mirrors their world life. Perhaps they do not experience a split between their religious life and daily life, whereas those who participate in intense affectual worship on a Sunday may find this untransmissible in the rest of their networks and relationships. The Church might well have a need to allow people to relate in non-intense ways.

Belonging to closed societies

(I) BOUNDARIES AND COMMUNITY

1.73 If we look at religious groupings, we can see that a proportion of these have reacted by becoming increasingly closed. Hard and fast boundaries tend to form between the community of 'us' and those who are 'other', a phenomenon which has had repercussions in other areas, particularly with regard to racism. One example of a closed society is the Christian sect known as the Exclusive Brethren which regards the world as intrinsically corrupt and its inhabitants as therefore potentially contaminating. This means that Exclusive Brethren prefer not to take part in public or democratic processes and lay their emphasis on self-examination. Needless to say, for some exclusive communities the price is extinction, since losses due to deaths and expulsions are not replaced in increasingly ageing communities.

1.74 Some new religious movements also develop similarly rigid boundaries, leading to the development of beliefs and practices designed to prevent loss of membership. Such practices include the maintenance of devoted allegiance, the taking away of possessions from 'outside' the group, or insisting that leaving the society will result in damnation, judgement or retribution. Being a member of such a closed society sometimes requires that members belong to no other form of network or grouping, even sometimes family groupings. This conditional belonging is thus concentrated in the closed society, and can be very attractive to people who find the kind of belonging offered by other areas of their life unsatisfactory. In particular, the strength of the new convert's adherence may shear against family notions of belonging and cause much distress to those left on the outside, who are conscious that their notions of the way the convert 'belongs' to them have been irreparably damaged. There is also a split in perception between 'inside' and 'outside', where parents and friends see the religious groups as possessive and manipulative, but the person on the inside may experience security,

peace and freedom from other responsibilities and anxieties, and intense caring and love.

1.75 We may see echoes of this in certain sections of the mainstream religions. A groundwork of belief in a set of basic truths makes for closeness and a deep sense of spiritual oneness. This closeness may be registered in the powerful community ties of fundamentalist Muslim factions, in the insistence of the absolute authority of the Pentateuch by some Hasidic and other Orthodox Jews or in the ecstatic worship of some charismatic congregations. This closeness may none the less be felt as threatening by other communities who feel there is no room for dialogue when belief and belonging are so powerfully integrated. Some such closed communities may also use their feelings of strength and confidence in their hard boundaries in a missionary outreach that is not by witness and example but by engulfment: a mission imperative to see what is 'other' become 'self'. This makes sensitivity in evangelism difficult to maintain, and 'targeting the vulnerable' may be the result. This is not a religious perspective to be set alongside others, but a response to an instinctive and overriding 'rightness' that necessitates the condition of belonging. These high-definition religious groups are often fast-growing in highly secularised societies.

1.76 In this section, we must also consider the traditional role of religious communities. Here, the mode of belonging can be understood as producing a situation where each individual is community. In closed orders, particularly, all the networks of a person's life are subsumed within the location of the community house and gathered into the life of prayer. In the sociological terms we have been discussing, the religious community becomes a focal 'nodal point'. We may also say that such a mode of belonging challenges much in modern life. We also have to distinguish between different kinds of religious community, particularly those whose members work in the world and the contemplative orders. These too may be changing:

Curiously, the new forms of Christian community which are developing are often ecumenical, for example L'Arche and Taizé. Just at the point that the great institutions of the religious life in the Catholic Church are declining, the concept of radical Christian community is spreading into other denominations and being radically reworked. As part of this new

development, there are expanding possibilities for lay ministry, and new forms of Christian community which are often ecumenical and mixed gender.⁴⁴

1.77 There are other communities living under a rule of common life, such as that at Iona. All of these provide models of how commonality of belief and belonging can focus the witnessing potential of that community in an enriching way. Sr Lavinia Byrne writes that by giving everything up, she has been given back everything. 'Sometimes I've scurried around looking for the treasure in the religious life, whereas the treasure was the transaction. I sold everything. I gave away everything. And now everything belongs to me. Everything.'⁴⁵

(II) AT WORK

1.78 Interestingly, this close correlation between believing and belonging may also be seen operating in some work environments. Some companies are analogous to those certain NRMs which keep members by tacit threat, maintaining absolute allegiance (even where it means breaking the law) by the constant concern for keeping their jobs (unemployment as damnation and punishment). Other companies use the relationship between believing and belonging as a market strategy. For example, the Body Shop sells its products through promoting belief in concern for the environment, being against cruelty to animals and articulating Anita Roddick's view that natural products can enhance human wholeness and lifestyle. It is important, then, that the staff who 'interface' between products and public, are seen to endorse these beliefs (for example, through wearing T-shirts) and to stand for caring ecology. The 'right' person for Body Shop jobs is therefore one with the proper attitude and willingness to believe the message which is being given to the public. This is to make selling into a kind of missionary activity.

Belonging to Christian denominations and the Church of England

1.79 In *Last Seen Wearing*, an episode of the TV drama series *Inspector Morse*, Morse asks his sergeant, 'Lewis, are you a Catholic?' Lewis looks puzzled. 'No sir, just the usual.' In other words, as any hospital receptionist

well knows, the default denomination in England is the C of E. There is the feeling that the established Church, being 'of England', is allied to nationality where that is English. This also means that the Church of England is more likely to have more modes of open belonging than closed committed belonging. Roman Catholics who no longer attend church are more likely to describe themselves as 'lapsed', i.e. out of a particular kind of belonging, than Anglicans who may make little distinction between attendance and non-attendance in terms of belonging. However, this further means that where Anglican congregations have changed from an open model to a 'gathered' model, based on identified membership, other denominations and marginal Anglicans have found themselves suddenly disenfranchised of the nominal belonging which may actually have been important to them.

1.80 Grace Davie has also identified a trend towards strong associational models in the suburban Church of England churches, where the grouping factor may be church tradition or style of worship and which, although attractive to their gathered congregations, isolate those who do not feel they belong there, *even though* the parochial system locates them at those churches.

1.81 In the inner city, the Church may have of necessity to use a much more open model. A Church Centre, for example, may have a multiplicity of functions including health care and social services, building up a variety of 'belongings' which may or may not be religious. In some Urban Priority Areas the concept of church *qua* church may simply be too much of a luxury. In other cases, we may look at the example of the St Marylebone Healing and Counselling Centre in London, which offers an NHS practice and up-to-date medical technology as well as alternative therapies, healing and spiritual direction and which is located in a functioning church with the Director as part of the clergy staff. The Centre also has a restaurant. This leads us to ask what bridges there are for people to cross from participation in social and health care over to what is offered by the Church in its worship, fellowship, spiritual direction and teaching. Surely, then, hospitality is an important aspect of mission.

The Body of Christ

1.82 While sociological and anthropological views of believing and belonging may give important insights into religious behaviour, it is also

necessary to look at theological perspectives of belonging. In one important sense, the Church is the community of all baptised Christians and all who are baptised are invested with a belonging which is inescapably part of their identity and which may bring them to church at major intersections in their lives. The Church is also the community of dedicated people who belong, of identified Christians who have made public profession of their belief, and of those who regularly attend church or who are on membership rolls.

1.83 Theologically, the Body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12) is one image of the Christian Church and as such it is assumed to be whole, an inclusive society, even though visibly fragmented denominationally and by the fracture between the communal and associational membership of those who participate and those who do not. This brings us back to Susan Hope's point, in the story about Terry the out-of-work boxer, whether there is a difference between being 'in Christ' and 'in the Body of Christ' which can be expressed as a continuum of strength of commitment.

1.84 This leaves us with the implications for belonging brought about by movements for Christian unity such as Churches Together bodies and other ecumenical projects and by the acceptance of the principle of unity in diversity and Christian diversity within plurality. With the general fragmentation of traditional core groupings in modern society it is clear that the strengthening of belief systems cannot be sustained by the notion of belonging. Consequently, working out what it means to be the Body of Christ in a whole series of fragmentations is a complex theological task. It may be that the Church is required to redefine what it means by *koinonia*, by fellowship, perhaps in terms of 'moral communities'. The problem with the latter is that there will also be diversity in how a church or congregation can form and express itself as a moral community.⁴⁶ The Church may need to address how far it desires Christians to stand over against society and in judgement of it. Agreed understandings of this may form part of belief-belonging interaction in a congregation, but this will vary.

1.85 *Koinonia*, fellowship, may be seen to operate under a double function. Love, tolerance, self-giving may be particular qualities which bind religious groups together as a community, and increase the sense of belonging through believing that this is the way to behave under God. Further, these aspects of a 'moral community' may also be what marks out a religious fellowship from other groups and networks, and should be particularly evident

in Christian congregations, whatever their diversity. This is surely important for mission.

1.86 Again, the missionary possibilities of congregations which are seen as moral communities may depend on the permeability of boundaries. In some cases, might not the strength of belonging to the community mean exclusion for those who would call themselves Christian but fall short of the group's interpretation of the biblical ideal? Recent examples which highlight this question include the refusal of a homosexual person as a godparent in one church and the isolation of adulterous church members in another. Other, 'softer' groups might seek to include those whom they would perceive to fall short, at the risk of appearing themselves indiscriminating or hypocritical.

1.87 In each of the two cases, different mission strategies would be implied by the type of *koinonia* the group wished to sustain. The first might insist on an outreach programme which saw conversion and repentance taking place outside the group as a result of witness by example. The second might take a 'judge not that you be not judged' attitude, expecting those admitted to the fellowship to be affected positively by becoming part of the group. Each type of moral community would also be placed to receive a certain type of person. The first would attract those desiring to make a complete transformation, leaving the old life behind; the second would attract those wishing to bring their lives and consciousness of brokenness into the fellowship itself. In each case, the group's perception of itself as fellowship, its self-description as a moral community and the way it communicates this to others have important implications for the way it can act in mission effectively.

1.88 When we say that the Church exists as a set of moral communities, this, together with other faith communities, gives religious institutions a corporate voice and power to stand over against the moral pluralism or 'anything goes' mentality of modern society. For Christians, the Body of Christ preserves the vision of ideals which make it possible for God's kingdom to exist. In order for God's future to come about, the Church has to preserve an image of a various community life lived according to God's intention. In doing so, it is able publicly to exercise judgement and to wait for society's tendency to fragment to return towards a search for coherence. As Archbishop Aram Keshishian has said:

Mission is not merely a function of *Koinonia* – it is her very *raison d'être*. The church has no mission. She participates in the *missio Dei*. God's will revealed in Jesus Christ calls the churches to common witness and service for the renewal of the world from its brokenness The church is called to break down barriers and reconcile a broken humanity. Thus the church as reconciled and reconciling *Koinonia* should express in her own life and mission God's purpose for humanity and creation.⁴⁷

1.89 This emphasis on the reconciling power of *koinonia* points us to a way through the problems of living in a diverse Church in a morally pluralistic world. Christians draw on their experience of fellowship within a local context of believing and belonging to forge strong bonds with others within and outside the Church. *Koinonia* is strengthened as reconciling work is done. In this way, each person in the fellowship contributes to the witness of the Church.

Conclusion

1.90 This brings us back to the basic common denominator: the person, known, chosen and loved by God before birth, cherished by God in relationship with God. We need to find out how we can recover the notion of belonging to God in ways which map on to the way life is lived in modern society. For example, if as is sometimes suggested, the 'post-modern' condition is characterised by fragmentation, then perhaps God can be found, fragmented and scattered, each fragment to be reconstituted whole for those searching for faith, wherever it is found. This notion of the *Logos Spermatikos*, the Scattered Word, which goes back to Justin Martyr, may be helpful in defining a mission strategy for the whole Church. The bread broken for us in the eucharist is gathered up into one in the solidarity of the eucharistic community: 'Though we are many, we are one Body, for we all partake of the one bread.' Further, this move towards solidarity is also a mission act, since it strengthens the Church in the recognition of its oneness under God. It is up to the Church, then, to find new methods of incorporating people into ways of belonging which do not conflict with their modes of belonging to other things. There have to be new openings which allow people to experience this community of the faithful in ways which are meaningful to them.

1.91 In creating these new openings, we must activate *koinonia* in ways which serve and complement the needs of particular kinds of people. We must also find new ways of being sacramental and of enabling the disenfranchised individual to belong. It is a human instinct to search for satisfying methods of belonging and a mirror of the totally interpersonal belonging that is characteristic of the Trinity. None the less, belonging cannot be imposed. Belonging can carry with it a fierce rightness and zeal, while its converse, not-belonging, can be alienating and painful. Consequently, we might usefully consider first not how people believe, but how they belong. In this way we can look again at how we act in mission and share our faith.

Summary

KEY WORDS

- believing ● belonging ● faith ● baptism ● individualisation
- post-materialism ● networks ● covenant ● fellowship

Religious belief in Britain remains relatively high, while belonging to the Church has declined. Believing and belonging are interrelated concepts and while sociologists differ as to how these are linked, there is now an emphasis on commitment as an index for believing and belonging in society.

Baptism remains the normative criterion for belonging in the Christian Church, but there are growing numbers of unbaptised. Even where people are not baptised as infants, the average time it takes for a person to come to a public profession of faith is four years. What kinds of belonging are available to people whose search for faith does not come by these routes? Scripture shows that Christian belief may be about belonging, as much as about believing. Covenant and fellowship are key concepts.

We have to take account of the process of individualisation and a strong pre-eminent sense of identity, over against ideas of relationism. This goes along with post-materialism, the emphasis on choice and on quality of life. A person may have dispersed geographical landmarks which are important and which relate to a set of dispersed networks. There are also various notions of belonging to a family in modern society. There are also changes in the way people participate or exercise membership, with a shift to non-

active, or non-committed belonging, resulting in people's experiences becoming distant and isolating. Some religious groupings become closed, separating out belonging to the group and belonging to the world. This is also true of some businesses and work environments.

It is necessary to distinguish the kinds of belonging available in the mainstream denominations and what bridges there are to those who do not belong to a church or fellowship. This means working out what it means to be the Body of Christ and what modes of belonging are available to people experiencing modern life and the trends of modern society. The mission question is how the Church can make it possible for such people to feel they can belong.

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Things to do

- **AIM:** to help you think about how people belong
 - in your local area
 - to your church or group
- **PURPOSE:** to see the points of contact between your church or group and the local community.

BIBLE VERSE

Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. (Romans 14.13)

Things to do include:

- a. A story to read, think about and discuss
- b. A plan for drawing your own map of where you go and belong
- c. Some discussion starters.

1. A STORY

Take me to your leader

Imagine a friendly alien has been observing our planet from his capsule. The capsule is characterised by a highly individualised lifestyle and has everything technology can provide to make the inhabitant comfortable: computer systems, TV, Internet, videos, CDs, microwave, washing machine (with multiple functions), a gym. The alien is alone but never lonely for he can chat to his friends using satellite communications. He knows via a multiplicity of channels what is happening on the earth. He supports a particular football team and belongs to a number of societies by using his electronic communications. He feels he is reasonably fulfilled and would be called 'post-materialist' for he has a high quality of life – *but does he belong to this planet?*

When the alien stops to consider such things, he thinks that all in all he does believe in God. Indeed, he is not above talking to God when things go wrong, or when the shadow side of his comfortable life intervenes.

One day the alien does something rather unusual. He leaves the capsule and goes to an unfamiliar place where human beings are gathered together. He goes in and is overwhelmed by the numbers of people sitting in rows. He ventures to sit down, but Mrs Brown always sits there and, sorry, Mandy's friend will be along in a minute. He finds an empty space uncomfortably near the front and works out that he should have equipped himself at the door with a red book, a green book and a sheet.

Something is happening and everyone but him knows what to do, when to stand, sit, sing. He can just about follow the book, but bits keep getting missed out and other bits mysteriously put in, so he spends his time catching up – a stranger who stands out. How is he ever going to learn what to do? He is left standing when the others are sitting down and feels embarrassed. Suddenly there is hand-shaking – thirty seconds of intense attention. What was that for?

Now he is asked for money, but he doesn't have any and his credit card won't do. Now everyone's getting up and going to the front. Why? He sits still and people stare. He feels envious of the people who know the drill, but how much effort is it going to take to achieve that level of familiarity? Where is there a book that will help him make sense of it all?

On the way out most people are friendly but still manage to pretend he doesn't exist. There is coffee in the hall but he can't bear the agony of standing out as an alien. Is the urge that brought him here enough to bring him back again, or to try somewhere else?

He goes back to his capsule and turns on the TV. *Neighbours* is on. Thank God.

Questions

- What is happening in this story?
- How do we treat non-church members – like people from another planet? Could you retell this story as if the church were an alien spaceship and the incomer had been captured by aliens? Think back to a time when you entered an unfamiliar place. What were your feelings? What helped you to feel that you belonged? Have you been back since?