

Negotiating Community: An Ethnographic Study of an Evangelical Church

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Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Lancaster University,
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ABSTRACT

Evangelical Christianity is commonly interpreted in terms of an ongoing reaction to a religiously and morally defunct modernity. Some commentators argue for its popularity on the grounds that it compensates for the discontents of modernity, offering certainty in a context of uncertainty, clarity amidst confusion. However, the efficacy of this process is dependent upon the maintenance of effective boundaries against modernisation. In recent times, evangelicalism has increasingly engaged with secular agencies and with forces outside of its traditional remit, leading to a comprehensive accommodation to - and *negotiation with* - modern ideas, media and values.

Tracing this process within a thriving evangelical Anglican church in northern England, I explore how congregational values are (a) liberalised, characterised by tolerance and a broadening of tradition; and (b) subjectivised, preoccupied with the inner life and needs of the self. As a point of comparison, I trace a different response in a progressive ‘alternative’ worship group attached to the church. In an interesting inversion, their driving ethos is a postmodern critique of the church and its apparent disconnection from contemporary culture; their concern: the discontents of the evangelical mainstream.

These case studies throw into question several common assumptions: that liberalisation leads to decline; that subjectivisation leads to atomisation; and that both processes advance along a simple or unidirectional route within particular communities. In particular, they highlight the importance of local demographic and historical filters in the negotiation with modern trends. Moreover, while accommodation appears to generate diversification, this does not necessarily lead to fragmentation. Rather, growth and the maintenance of community here depend on sustaining cultural affinities with a target audience, providing opportunities for empowerment among members and maintaining a collective sense of self in public discourse.

LIST OF CONTENTS

Abstract	(i)
List of Contents	(ii)
Figures and Tables	(vi)
Acknowledgements	(vii)

CHAPTER ONE

EVANGELICALISM AND MODERNITY: THE DYNAMICS OF CONTEMPORARY CHANGE

Contrasting Images of Evangelicalism	1
Reflection: Approaching the Research Site	14
Negotiating Identities in the Field	18
Evangelicalism and Modernity: Theories and Patterns	22
Modernisation and the Homeless Mind	24
Religion and the Quest for Certainty	27
Movements of Accommodation	29
Key Research Questions	32
Note on the Thesis Structure	35
Note on the Text	37

CHAPTER TWO

EVANGELICALISM IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLAND

Introduction	38
Defining Evangelical Christianity	38
Cognate Terms	40
A Caveat	42
Growth and Decline	43
The UK Background: Decline Amongst the Churches	43
Signals of Evangelical Growth	44
(1) Evangelical Crusades	45
(2) Expansion through the Universities	46
(3) Expansion through Clerical Networks	47
Congregational Growth	48
The Changing State of English Evangelicalism	53
The 1960s as an Axis of Change	54
The Evangelical Response	57
The Relaxation of Boundaries	58
(1) Ecumenism	58
(2) Social Action as Evangelism	60
(3) The Embrace of Popular Culture and the Arts	63
The Charismatic Movement	67
<i>Alpha</i>	71
Post-Evangelicalism	73
Comment: Accommodation and Resistance	77
Sleeping with the Enemy? The Proximity of Evangelicalism to Modern Forces	81
The Significance of Social Class	84
Summary	87

CHAPTER THREE**ST MICHAEL-LE-BELFREY, YORK: HISTORY, GROWTH AND CHANGE**

Introduction	88
Context	89
St Michael-le-Belfrey: Past and Present, Growth and Change	91
Growth and Decline	99
Explaining Growth and Decline	103
The Demographic Make-up of the Congregation	104
Sources	104
Gender	105
Age	105
Occupation	106
Ethnicity	106
Education	106
Christian Background	107
Elective Parochialism	108
Demographic Profile: Summary	109
Congregational Life	110
Summary	111

CHAPTER FOUR**LIBERALISATION: THE BOUNDARIES OF CONGREGATIONAL IDENTITY**

“St Mike’s is a bit liberal for me...”	113
The Liberalisation Question	114
Measuring Liberalisation	115
Participation in Broader Developments	118
Cultural Relevance	121
Signals of Traditional Piety	123
Substitutionary Atonement and the Closeness of God	124
The Centrality of Scripture	127
Summary	129
Movements of Accommodation	129
The Truth Status of the Scriptures	129
The Fate of Non-Believers	137
The Role and Status of Women	143
Capitulating to Modernity?	147
Interlude: Statistical Correlations	149
(1) The Generation Factor	149
(2) The Gender Factor	151
Negotiating the Boundaries of the Faith	152
Sermons: Trends in Public Teaching	156
Public Tensions and the Avoidance of Conflict	163
Conclusion	165
Summary	167

CHAPTER FIVE**SUBJECTIVITY AND EXPERIENCE**

Introduction: “Life is basically spiritual...”	168
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The Turn to the Subjective	171
Subjectivity in St Michael's	173
Personal Narratives	175
Plausibility and Meaning	183
Subjectivity in Ritual Forms	184
Prayer	185
Charismatic Gifts	189
(1) Glossolalia	189
(2) Words of Knowledge	192
The 'Turn to Life'	199
Summary	202
The Ritualisation of Life	203
Cynicism Towards the Charismatic	205
Summary	210

CHAPTER SIX

INNOVATIONS AT THE MARGINS: IDENTITY AND PROGRESSION IN *VISIONS*

Introduction	212
Warehouse: The History and Development of a Project in Friendship	214
Evangelism	
Current Directions: From Friendship Evangelism to Post-Evangelicalism	219
Participants: Core and Periphery	220
(1) The Core Group	220
(2) Peripheral Participants	224
Changing Structures	224
Dimensions of the Reconfiguration Process	225
(1) 'Defusing' Authority	225
Repressive Tolerance	231
(2) Mobilising the Aesthetic	232
(3) The Reconfiguration of Shared Attitudes	237
Explanations of Change	248
Cultural Distance: The Relationship between St Michael's and <i>Visions</i>	250
Opposition and Identity	255
Comparisons: Similar Innovations	256
Conclusion	259
Liberalisation	260
Subjectivisation	261
Summary	263

CHAPTER SEVEN

SMALL GROUPS: THE EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY

Introduction: Community and Belonging	265
The Problem of Community	267
Community and Commitment in St Michael's	269
Community and Commitment in <i>Visions</i>	273
Summary	275
Family and Community Congregations	277
Wuthnow on Small Groups	279
Small Groups in St Michael's	283

Tolerating Difference	286
Legitimising Member Identities	289
Mutual Support	292
Small Group in <i>Visions</i>	296
Sharing the Journey?	301
Intellectualism	306
Mutual Support	311
Language	312
Comparisons	314
Small Groups, Modernisation and Meaning	316
Summary	321
CHAPTER EIGHT	
CONCLUSION: COMMUNITY AND COMMITMENT	
Summary of the Argument	322
Broader Implications	325
Sustaining Community and Commitment	329
APPENDIX A: THE PRAGMATICS OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION	
Immersion and Observation	340
Note-taking	342
Interviews	344
Document Resources	349
Ethics	349
APPENDIX B: THE QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY	
The Scale of the Questionnaire	351
Selecting the Sample	351
Distribution and Collection	353
Why the <i>Visions</i> group were not also surveyed	354
The Questionnaire	356
APPENDIX C: THE <i>VISIONS</i> SUNG CREED	370
BIBLIOGRAPHY	371

FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure One	Levels of Regular Church Attendance among English churches by churchmanship	50
Figure Two	Changes in Attendance Levels among Different Branches of Evangelicalism in England	53
Figure Three	Levels of Involvement at St Michael-le-Belfrey, by Multiple Sources	101
Figure Four	Key themes in public teaching	158
Figure Five	Selective Privatisation amongst the St Michael's congregation	162
Table One	Average Attendance at each of the services at St Michael-le-Belfrey, 1999	111
Table Two	Attitudes towards the truth of the Bible in the St Michael's congregation, the US evangelical 'coming generation' and in Britain	130
Table Three	Attitudes towards traditional gender roles within St Michael's and Britain	144
Table Four	Moral conservatism among the St Michael's congregation	160
Table Five	The classification of 'words of knowledge' occurring at evening services at St Michael-le-Belfrey	195
Table Six	St Michael-le-Belfrey and <i>Visions</i> - Contrasting Values	251

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“You don’t own a thing unless you can give it up.” (Stephen Lawhead)

NB: The *Visions Sung Creed* in Appendix C is reproduced here with the kind permission of Sue Wallace.

CHAPTER ONE - EVANGELICALISM AND MODERNITY: THE DYNAMICS OF CONTEMPORARY CHANGE

Contrasting Images of Evangelicalism

Despite its imposing structure, the 16th Century Anglican church stands as a warm and welcoming presence on this cold January evening. The church is well lit, bustling with activity, and as is the case every Sunday, over three hundred worshippers are busy making their way into the pews. Many of them arrive in groups, and a huddled queue develops as people are welcomed in and greeted by familiar faces as they enter the church building. As we enter, we are greeted by a young couple, each standing on either side of the doorway. They smile warmly, hand us a copy of the weekly notice sheet and welcome us to the church of St Michael-le-Belfrey.

Inside the doorway, a small foyer is packed full of people, flicking through leaflets, browsing through the book stall, and chatting with familiar parishioners. A couple of middle aged churchwardens stand nearby, watching with interest, and make sure that everyone can find a seat. Any newcomers are taken aside, greeted and escorted to a free space in the pews.

Inside, the church nave is large and imposing, capable of seating some seven hundred in its traditional wooden pews and in the balcony overhead. Its largely white-washed interior is for the most part devoid of visual artistry, that is, apart from the two colourful banners embroidered with enigmatic Bible verses: “Jesus, Light of the World”, “His Spirit Lives in Me”. A painted Reredos of the adoration of the shepherds is also situated behind the altar, although this has faded and darkened with time. However, there is a strong sense of colour throughout the building – shining

forth from the vivid stained glass as much as from the keen activity of the congregation.

While the grey stone memorials and solemn altar evoke a sense of tradition, the bright lights and casual style of interaction create a more informal atmosphere. All age groups appear to be represented: large groups of undergraduate students gather in the side pews, long-attending families arrive and sit together, while elderly parishioners greet old friends and make their way to their usual seats, some of them praying quietly alone as they prepare to worship. Some people take this time to skim through the church notice-sheet, or to browse through the other items of promotional paperwork which are placed along the pews: leaflets about the *Alpha* course, fliers advertising a new youth mission event, and application forms for a forthcoming Lent prayer course. But the majority are engaged in eager conversation, some warmly embracing one another as they meet, their broad smiles conveying an overwhelming sense of intimacy and shared enthusiasm.

The beginning of the service is signalled by an elderly man, who stands at the lectern and announces today's notices. The congregation listen intently in silence. He encourages newcomers to become members of the church by filling in a 'welcome card', asks existing members to bring along non-Christian friends to the forthcoming *Alpha* course, and urges us all (there is no distinction made between members and non-members) to attend the immanent monthly church prayer meeting, to worship and pray together as a church.

Sung worship features heavily in the service, and is accompanied by a band, consisting of guitars, keyboards, drums, some brass and several leading singers. All are amplified through a central PA system, necessary not only because of the size of the building, but also as a means of achieving sufficient volume over the rousing singing of the congregation. Indeed, many sing along with an expressive confidence that is accompanied by a raising of arms held aloft and open, a recognised gesture of praise. Some close their eyes and shake their heads, smiling in expressions of quiet adoration as they sing. Others save any gestured expression for the rousing chorus. As is commonplace in present-day evangelical churches, popular choruses – with catchy melodies and lyrics which stress the simplicity of the divine: human relationship - are preferred over traditional hymns. However, St Michael's appears to have found a compromise in also offering contemporary, lively arrangements of time-honoured hymnody. Both styles of sung worship are in evidence here, and the congregation appears to respond equally well to rousing anthems as it does to sentimental ballads.

If active lay participation is an impassioned feature of sung worship, it is also in evidence at more formalised points of the service. While the liturgy of the confession and absolution are led by the lay service leader and the sermon is given by the vicar, normal members of the congregation are instrumental in performing more peripheral, but no less visible roles. The Bible readings, composition and offering of the weekly prayers, administration of the collection, welcoming at the church doors, running the book store, operating the PA desk – all are performed by different parishioners. Again, all age groups are represented in these tasks, and the leadership appear to have no trouble finding volunteers. If there is an effort here to regularly mobilise lay leadership, it is one embraced by the congregation at large.

The day's Bible readings are given, on this occasion especially selected by the preacher rather than taken from the Church of England lectionary. Following this, the vicar approaches the pulpit in preparation for the sermon. His name is Roger Simpson, a clergyman recently appointed to St Michael's who has been received warmly by the congregation. Simpson is in his late forties, and is this evening dressed in a dark suit, striped shirt and tie. His tone is warm but assertive, and his delivery is both measured and steady. The theme for the whole service is the empowerment of others within the church, and the sermon addresses this theme with special reference to the New Testament reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Simpson's preaching is very much in the style of an expositor; he works from a specific Biblical passage, moving towards what he takes to be its principle message, before outlining the practical implications of this for the church today. The absolute centrality of the scriptures is evident not only in Simpson's preaching, but also in the way his parishioners eagerly follow his references using the Bibles set in the pews. The reference (and also often the page number) to each cited verse is clearly stated from the pulpit, so that congregants may follow the teaching in the printed text before them. Most are keenly attentive to the sermon, some even taking notes.

Simpson speaks about how the members of a living church should relate to one another as a community, and invokes clear Biblical guidelines. He refers repeatedly to his chosen passage (Ephesians, 4: 1-16), stressing two key qualities: unity and holiness,

“This new community that God is calling into existence is to be completely distinct from the secular culture in which it is part, it is to be set apart, holy – that's what holiness means, to be set apart – to belong to God.”

Listening to his words, I am reminded of the common tendency within evangelicalism to distance itself from matters of ‘the world’ in favour of a kind of spiritual purity. But Simpson’s message is not so straightforwardly exclusivist. He suggests that our unity in Christ is strengthened by the diversity of human gifts within the church. Simpson opposes the traditional understanding, derived from 1 Corinthians, that there are nine spiritual gifts. He says that every person has a gift from God and that this gift is given so that they may serve the church. Throughout his sermon he emphasises this paradox: the strength of the church in its diversity, and its status as set apart from a corrupt “secular culture”. Indeed, it is through its diversity, argues Simpson, that the church may cope with the problems of the contemporary world.

“...the New Testament envisages the evangelists, and the pastors and the teachers, equipping and empowering others to do this work to enable the people of God to be a servant people, actively but humbly, according to their gifts, in a world of alienation and pain.”

Only with the active lay ministry of the congregation can the church hope to develop and grow for the future. He urges the congregation to encourage each other in the faith, and exist together in relationships of support and mutual learning. He reflects on his own experience as a “new Christian” when he was a young student, mentioning the important guidance of one of his peers, a young man who mentored him and supported him in his Bible study when his faith was in most need of nurture and growth. The message here is that it is only through the strength of its community that the church – both St Michael’s and the wider Christian communion – may hope to withstand the pressures and temptations of modern life.

After the sermon, the elderly service leader approaches the lectern, and says that there are some people who have come forward with things they believe God wants to say to the church tonight. Three ‘words of knowledge’ are then offered, delivered to

individuals from the congregation but spoken to us by the service leader, who reads them from written notes he has been given. After each he offers a response. One of them concerns someone who is thinking about becoming a full member of the church, but who see themselves as a small part and feel that they will be crushed by the enormity of the congregation. The service leader responds with a message from God.

“The Lord wants to say to them, The big body is made up of lots of little bodies... and as all the little parts meet together and fuse together, you become part of one big body – an important part and a useful part, and the thing that is seen is not the foot, but the head, who is Jesus.”

The congregation sing the final two songs in succession, *Hallelujah Sing to Jesus* and *We're Looking to Your Promise*. Following the final chorus, the vicar moves to the centre front of the church, and gives the blessing. He moves alongside the service leader, and they walk up the centre aisle before approaching the door of the church. There they will stand as they greet people, one by one, as they leave. The band strike up again at this point, and play an instrumental version of the last song. People take their seats, chat with friends close by, and then begin to move around the church – around and among the social networks forged in and through the church community. They will socialise for another thirty minutes or so, before the last stragglers leave, onward home or else to their favourite local pub, where they will join other friends from the church and conclude their Sunday over beer and conversation.

Dating from the mid fifteenth century, St Cuthbert's is named after its patron, the Bishop of Lindisfarne. A parish church in its own right for many years, the building became the administrative centre of St Michael-le-Belfrey in 1973. It is now used to house the offices of the extensive St Michael's staff, as well as for functions and

church youth meetings. The *Visions* group have used the building for their services since they first began in 1991.

Although the church structure dates back some five hundred years, its interior is partially transformed by 20th century technology for the purposes of this evening's event. At the far end of the church, in the old sanctuary, the space has been converted into a small even-sided hall. As is standard practice for *Visions* events, the lighting is heavily dimmed. Any limited illumination is provided by small spot lights carefully positioned high in the ceiling rafters, and the colours emanating from the various slide projections shine more vividly out of the darkness. The intense and evocative scent of incense is immediately present upon entering the building – not the sweet smell of fashionable joss-sticks, but the heady, oppressive odour of church incense, evoking a sense of ritual, reverence and sacred space.

The entire east wall, which stretches to a height of about twenty-five feet, is covered by a suspended white sheet. This effectively acts as a screen for various images, which are projected onto it from a series of slide projectors, positioned at the back of the room. The images are striking by their apparent incongruity: a foetus in the womb, a circus performance of men riding bicycles across tightropes. The dominant image depicts a large crowd of people who appear to be watching a football match, blending into a crowded scene on a city street. The images form a complex whole, a collage rather than a collection of discrete icons. There are no boundaries between the images, and their vivid juxtaposition and tendency to merge into one another is both striking and evocative. It is a symbolism that challenges any straightforward preconceptions one might have about art, church and the 'message' of a ritualised event.

There are a series of TV screens scattered around the room. Two have been placed on what was once an altar table, an old and disused artefact now shrouded in black cloth. All the TVs face inwards, towards the centre, where people are beginning to gather. They each display an identical series of rapidly changing video images. These are mixed and controlled live by a young teenaged girl who stands before a multitude of technological gadgetry, tapes and video recorders. Moving images are shown without cessation throughout the service, as well as both before and after the event has apparently concluded, a policy which effectively blurs the boundaries of the service. The images vary considerably – some express an aesthetic love of nature (the constant flow of a waterfall; images of a bud opening into a flower). Others suggest revolution (the tumbling Berlin Wall; soldiers raising rifles triumphantly into the air as they march over a silhouetted hill). Other images combine traditional Christian symbolism with elements from other traditions, or with images drawn from dance or pop video culture (a large cross shines behind lines from a native American poem about the sacredness of the land; a stone cross revolves in 3D as shining stripes of colour emanate from its centre). The images progress rapidly, sometimes appearing to reflect the themes addressed in the service, and sometimes not. The most striking thing about the use of visual simulation is that it is constant and present at every side, the TVs positioned so that images constantly bombard our vision from all angles.

At the very front of the room, positioned behind the video equipment, is a sound desk, and behind this stands the DJ. The music is managed by a man in his early thirties, whose long locks compliment his beard, giving him an almost Christ-like appearance. The music played throughout the service is based around the styles of ambient trance and up-beat techno, reflecting the group's affinity with the dance culture. Music plays

constantly throughout the event, and punctuates the developing activities and rituals of the service. The majority of the pieces are instrumental, although some feature vocal backing tracks which are used to compliment the choral lines sung during the service. The words of these songs, as well as any instructions to participants and liturgy, are projected onto the centre of the east wall. While in St Michael's, the Overhead Projector allows hymn-book-free hands to be raised in praise, here, it is deployed with a more complex effect, most notably as a channel of rhetorically expressed order amidst visual chaos.

At the beginning of the service, several tables are positioned around the periphery of the room, each surrounded by chairs. There are fifteen of us present, including those involved in facilitating the service, and we each collect food from a small buffet at the back of the room before joining others at the various tables. Those present are aged between 15 and 44, and most are regular participants in *Visions* services. We collect our food, consisting of salad, cold meats, crisps and cake, and chat while we eat. The conversation is casual, not surprisingly considering that most of those present are well known to one another. Those not engaged in light conversation are busy viewing the video playing on all of the TV screens with sound: a feature film about Oscar Romero, the martyred priest from El Salvador. Most of those present seem familiar with his story.

After about 30 minutes, while we are still seated, we are welcomed to the service by a young woman named Rebecca, who stands at the front with a microphone. We are told that this is a 'High Tea' service, and that our theme for today is 'Leaps of Faith'. Without any further explanation, she says that we are to begin with our readings. A

young teenaged girl begins with an excerpt from Genesis - the story of the calling of Abram – which she reads from a piece of paper by candlelight at the front of the room. She is followed by a woman aged about 30, who reads from Paul’s letter to the Hebrews. We are not told the exact references, nor are we given Bibles in order that we might follow the text.

After the two readings, Rebecca moves to the front once more and introduces a video clip. It is taken from *The Matrix*, the Hollywood feature film released the previous year. She tells us briefly about the character in the clip, Neo, who is about to make a leap of faith, something “we have all probably had to do at some point”. The clip is played, and the characters of Neo and Morpheus are watched intently on all of the TV screens as they discuss the option of the blue or the red pill. The exchange is not about religion as such, but there are implicit themes of trust and faith that have obvious parallels with Christian understandings of the human relationship with God.

The service moves on, without explanation, to address the figure of Abraham once more. Steven, in his mid thirties and dressed casually with long hair tied back in a ponytail, approaches the front of the room. He gives us a brief synopsis of Abraham’s life story, told in historical terms, and paying attention to factors such as his family life and the environment in which he lived. Although clearly basing this on written notes, Steven skims over the details casually and humbly, giving the impression that he intends to give descriptive detail and information: the background to a story, rather than the structure of an argument. If I encounter exposition in St Michael’s, here I am offered suggestion and food for thought.

Rebecca takes the floor once more. She says she is going to talk about how we might know God in our lives: we might have strange inner feelings, but how do we know that this is God, and not something else, like indigestion! Speaking briefly and casually, her delivery betrays a nervous hesitancy that suggests she is speaking from the heart. She offers fragments of advice about how we might discern a divine presence or guidance in our lives. We might talk to wise friends whom we trust. We might appeal to our intuition – if it feels wrong then it may well not be right. She asks us to consider our conscience – does our feeling sit well with our conscience? Despite her uncertain tone, she ends on a note of optimism: we can rest assured that God is behind it all – whatever the circumstances, we can be assured of this. Her talk is distinctive in discussing religious experience at a ‘Christian’ event, but without using Biblical language or mentioning Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. Her language is suggestive of a far more vaguely defined notion of subjective experience – real, and yet ultimately mysterious.

Rebecca then introduces the next feature. We are going to say a prayer that helps us to concentrate on God. It is based on the final piece of dialogue from the film, *Bladerunner*, where the female ‘replicant’ is forced to make a decision of whether to trust Deckard to take her safely away from danger. ‘Do you love me?’, he asks her. ‘I love you’, she replies. ‘Do you trust me?’ ‘I trust you.’ These words are projected onto the large screen before us and a steady dance track begins to play. Over the music is played a haunting recording of a man and a woman speaking the two lines from the film, over and over. And Rebecca invites us, “if we feel comfortable doing so”, to say these words to ourselves in prayer.

This exercise lasts around 5 minutes, and most people can be seen either mouthing the words or else sitting silently in prayer. Although many participants exhibit an intense concentration, few conventional prayer gestures are apparent. Hands are not held aloft, few heads are bowed, and several pairs of eyes remain open. All appear united, however, in facing directly forward, towards the front wall awash with colour and dazzling image, and towards the large, mantra-like words of the prayer before them.

As the backing track fades away, Rebecca re-emerges to introduce “our period of sung worship”. We are told to feel free to dance and sing as we want to, to feel free to worship God. At this point the dance track becomes louder and begins to ascend into a crescendo of thudding beats before settling into a continuous steady rhythm. Several people stand up and begin to dance near to their seats, clapping to the rhythm and raising their hands in a fashion reminiscent of night clubs and youthful celebration. One or two voices can be heard above the pounding backing track, although most are inaudible behind the high, incisive singing of the service leader, whose words are amplified through large speakers while she dances and praises God, facing the stunning front wall as her focal point of vision.

More people get up to dance as new tunes emerge from the speakers. Some songs are based on popular chart tracks, which have been adjusted to include lyrics of a Christian or at least vaguely spiritual character. All follow a fast dance beat and are skilfully sandwiched between instrumental pieces which develop and punctuate the key songs through a skilful blending of rhythmic progressions. Dry ice occasionally pours out of two smoke machines positioned at the far corners of the room. They hiss loudly as they emit a white vapour that temporarily engulfs the dancers and adds a

renewed sense of mystery and awe to an event already saturated with sensory stimulation from every angle. Here, technology and the sacred appear hand in hand, with each feeding into the other in an intense moment of celebration.

Eventually, after about 20 minutes of dance and sung worship, there is a marked reduction in volume and the music gradually develops into a steady, ambient track – a soothing, relaxing piece that signals the conclusion of the service. Steven steps forward once more and tells us that this is the end of the service, but asks everyone to stick around for coffee and a chat. The group will also retire to the pub later on, and everyone is welcome to join them.

The microphone is switched off, people begin to talk once more, and hot drinks are brought into the hall on a tray. As those present discuss the success of the service and chat to each other about more personal issues, they help themselves to tea or coffee and finish off the rest of the buffet. After about thirty minutes many of the occasional attendees have left, leaving the *Visions* regulars, who proceed across the road to The Black Swan where they will stay until it closes. Several of them will then return to St Cuthbert's to pack away the equipment, a task that will take another hour. However, boredom will be relieved by playing loud dance music through the PA system while cables are coiled, TVs lifted, and huge sheets are taken down to reveal drab stone work where there had, only a hour before, been brilliant colour.

Reflection: Approaching the Research Site

These two accounts are of services that I attended during January and March 2000 respectively, some months into a period of ethnographic fieldwork. I had originally become interested in the *Visions* group as a site of ‘alternative’ worship (or ‘alt.worship’, as is their preferred label), the multi-media based movement that had swept through many churches since the emergence of the Nine O’Clock Service (NOS) in Sheffield during the late 1980s (Howard, 1995; Roberts, 1999). Intent on studying the movement *via* a case-study, I began researching various UK groups on the internet. Entering the *Visions* site, I was struck by the group’s attempt to articulate its identity: “We’re a collective of people with major interests in the visual arts, dance music, technology, and Christian spirituality.” (*Visions* website, accessed Autumn, 1998)

The site was notable for an evident desire to remain within Christian tradition, but also by an additional appeal to an unusually varied array of other religious and non-religious resources. The site mentioned evangelicalism, liberalism, charismatic renewal, Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Creation Spirituality. Also referred to were post-modernism, environmental concerns such as recycling and nuclear testing, and the spiritual virtues of the Celtic tradition. Most other alt.worship sites had been far less eclectic, and had given much less space to the articulation of a collective position on theological and social issues. I was drawn to the site because of a certain thoughtfulness of language, and by the sense of spiritual openness suggested by its unusually diverse spectrum of influences.

Bearing in mind these initial impressions, I was understandably intrigued to discover that the church to which the *Visions* group were attached had been a major centre of evangelical revival. St Michael-le-Belfrey had been a vanguard of evangelical growth and expansion since the 1960s, and continues to enjoy a congregation which is exceptionally large and abnormally active, considering the UK Anglican norm. The church is also seen as something of an exemplar within the evangelical world, and is commonly associated with effective church growth, charismatic revival and evangelical integrity. This was something of a surprise, as my own perceptions of evangelicalism were very much centred on theological and social conservatism. The last thing I expected of an evangelical church was a progressive worship group which appeared to embrace social activism, critical thinking and a liberal, almost 'New Age' embrace of spiritual diversity.

My ongoing investigations into alternative worship began to shed some light on this apparent incongruity. The movement is largely populated by ex-evangelicals, evangelicals who have somehow become disillusioned with their spiritual heritage. In spite of this, they have chosen to remain within the church and re-explore the boundaries of the faith within its organisational structure. The entire movement is one of detraditionalisation (Heelas, Lash and Morris, 1996), borne out of a dissatisfaction with charismatic evangelical strands of UK church subculture.

It appeared that the case of St Michael's and *Visions* was no exception, and represented a wider trend. *Visions* had constructed itself as a progressive Christian collective, and defined its initiatives as a measured response to the mainstream charismatic worship represented in its parent church. In purely aesthetic terms, this

response was virtually asymmetric. Typical services exhibited a series of oppositional trends: words versus images, exposition versus suggestion, clarity versus ambiguity. But at the same time, patterns of continuity – for example a stress on subjective experience and on shared leadership – implied a more complex picture. *Visions* clearly embodied a critique, *but also a progression* of core evangelical ideas, embedded in a shared body of lived tradition.

I gradually became convinced that a method deployed to explore this process of detraditionalisation would need to take full account of the dialectical process at play. In so far as alternative worship is an initiative embedded in evangelical tradition, any analysis will need to take account of the interplay between the two. A case study approach would then logically proceed from a comparative exploration of two locally intertwined congregations – one representing the evangelical mainstream, the other the alt.worship movement. This way issues of geographical area, social class and local church culture may be factored into a study of emerging trends. The case of St Michael's and *Visions* suggested itself as an ideal focus, and I made plans to study the two congregations through close empirical observation over a period of a year. Proceeding from the argument that culture – religious or otherwise – is generated and sustained through a process of interactive meaning-making (Fine, 1979; Geertz, 1973), my method was both multi-focussed and multi-contextual from the outset. The aim at this initial point was to arrive at an understanding of detraditionalisation by tracing the ways that each group defined itself in comparison with, and in relation to, the other. Such subtle processes could only be brought to light through close empirical observation and absorption in local cultures. The specific strategies employed in this 'ethnographic' fieldwork are detailed in appendix one.

As the fieldwork progressed, I increasingly gave both groups equal weight in the project. In formal, administrative terms, they constituted two different congregational groups under the auspices of a single Anglican parish church. As such, they shared the same leadership, church buildings and functioned within the same organisational structure. They emerged out of a common history, shaped by parochial factors and by the broader evangelical movement in the UK. And yet they also embodied radical differences, apparently grounded in Christian convictions but also clearly manifest in divergent behavioural and interactive norms. For example, St Michael's parishioners embraced a lively and active spoken discourse of belief, expressing their faith in a rich tapestry of references through a vocabulary of shared evangelical jargon (Warner, 1988: 72). Phrases such as "to minister", "brother in Christ" and "the fellowship" were commonplace among most members. But the same vocabulary was not deployed by the *Visions* group, who appeared to shy away from expressing religious convictions in formulaic terms. In response to this, I began to focus upon the ways in which the two groups presented themselves publicly; particularly, on how they dealt with outsiders, for it was in the management of these encounters that their most striking differences were most vividly manifest.

In this respect, key insights were gained from the ways in which members of the two groups reacted to me as an outsider researcher in the midst of their lives. An appeal to reflexivity – reflection on the role that the researcher plays in the ongoing construction of ethnographic reality - has become fashionable in recent sociological and anthropological writing (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Coffey, 1999; Davies, 1999; Geertz, 1988; van Maanen, 1988). It is justified as a strategy for facilitating a political accountability (Skeggs, 1997) as well as a greater methodological rigour (Crick,

1982). We need to both offer an account of the production of knowledge and explore this process for fruitful insights into the cultural phenomena under study. Here, I draw from a reflexive method in so far as it sheds light on *the negotiation of the boundaries of evangelical identity*. The negotiation of my own presence and place within St Michael's and *Visions* exposed complex patterns of negotiation within the communities themselves, especially in terms in their relations with 'the world'.

Negotiating Identities in the Field

From the outset, my status in relation to the members of both groups was deeply ambiguous. On one level, there was a striking degree of cultural affinity – like a great many of St Michael's members, for example, I was white, in my twenties, from a middle class background, and had been through higher education. The majority of members were also highly articulate – indeed, almost intellectual - about their faith and held academic training in the highest esteem. My theology degree was useful in providing me with the right discursive tools for the job. Indeed, this was especially the case with respect to the *Visions* group, whose shared theological acumen could often be placed well above the academic average. I could blend in and converse with the congregation without any significant degree of cultural displacement and without the need for a lengthy period of acclimatisation. Moreover, I was not entering a context in which my presence was likely to be seen as incongruous or seriously challenged.

On the other hand I was thoroughly marginal, both in the sense of being a researcher rather than purely a member, but also in terms of my religious identity. At the time of fieldwork I was, and still am, an agnostic and, despite a childhood of regular churchgoing, had since come to position myself firmly outside of the Christian faith.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was honest and open about this, if occasionally a little tentative about the way in which I expressed myself. Reactions to me were thoroughly congenial, both before and after individuals had learnt of my purposes in being there, and I experienced no notable sense of suspicion. This was quite a surprise, as I had expected that some degree of resistance would be an inevitable obstacle in researching a conservative Christian group (cf. Peshkin, 1984). But my experience of being fostered by the congregation revealed more than mere hospitality. After a while, I began to see how my status as a researcher served as a channel for the expression of community values, as parishioners appropriated the fact of my presence as a means of validating their pre-existing beliefs. For many, my presence as a researcher legitimated the special status of their church. They were proud of St Michael's and welcomed an opportunity for its work to be recorded and held up as an exemplar through the publication of my findings. Their unwavering confidence in the integrity and success of their church was such that they assumed a shining report from me was inevitable. To others, I was an obvious target for evangelism, the outsider looking in who, in spite of his meaning well, really ought to make a firm commitment to Christ in order to avoid ultimate damnation. Others were less pressing, and valued my presence, demonstrating this in an extension of key 'Christian' virtues, such as hospitality, fellowship and emotional support. For this I was grateful, and felt embraced by the community. Still other, more charismatically minded parishioners, saw my project as a divinely guided initiative, a firm example of the myriad ways in which Christ steers unbelievers into the midst of the faithful. As I attempted to soak up the culture of St Michael's, so its members repeatedly projected their values onto me.

These values were more diverse than I expected, although, fairly early on, I did begin to note distinctive patterns in the way that my presence was being ‘managed’ by the members of St Michael’s on the one hand and by the members of *Visions* on the other. Members of St Michael’s took my ubiquitous presence as a sign of some kind of Christian piety. Some elderly parishioners even went so far as to suggest that I was a great example to my peers! It simply did not occur to them that someone would study religion (especially *their church*) who was not also a ‘good Christian’. These encounters yielded significant insights into shared attitudes, not least that piety was often assumed on the basis of a practical engagement with the congregation.

And yet, on a different, discursive level, my non-Christian status meant that I was categorised as radically different from the internal norm. Initial reactions to my presence, while perfectly affable, were also highly interrogative. Many congregants asked about my faith upon first meeting, usually as an initial reaction to me describing my role as a researcher. This question mainly took the simple and unwavering form: ‘are you a Christian?’. I came to learn that this required a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer; parishioners assuming there was a common understanding of what the question meant, and believing that the issue could be addressed in simple, dichotomous terms. Either one was a Christian, or one was not. This was hammered home by one parishioner who railed against my vague, evasive answers, passionately challenging me to “get off the fence!” Moreover, to be ‘Christian’ was an achieved status - it was contingent upon personal choice, change and commitment (Warner, 1988: 72). While I was apparently included in the congregation on a practical level, its shared discourse constructed me as definably ‘other’.

My experiences with the *Visions* group were quite different. They also assumed that my continued attendance at their services and meetings was an indication of some kind of personal allegiance. Indeed, after several months in the field, one member, openly and in all seriousness, pointed out that I had demonstrated a “clear commitment to the community”. I was initially baffled by this statement, especially as I had not knowingly indicated any degree of Christian belief or commitment to the vision of the group in my conversations with them. However, I afterwards learnt that the understanding of membership within the group was quite different from that of their parent church.

In St Michael’s, initial impressions of my practical commitment were, in the eyes of many members, compromised by my open expressions of non-belief. While my participation was significant, I was still an outsider. In *Visions*, the group made a point of dissociating belonging from personal belief. In stark contrast to the interrogative tendency in St Michael’s, no *Visions* members (bar one) ever asked me about what my personal beliefs were. This was not merely a lack of interest or a sign of introverted personalities. Rather, conversations with members revealed that several of them were fully conscious of not asking me about my own faith or lack of it, and saw this as distinguishing their own approach to Christian practice from that of the evangelical mainstream. For the members of *Visions*, non-interrogation was an important manifestation of their key values, i.e. not to alienate outsiders by asking them questions that may exacerbate their sense of being outsiders. Within *Visions*, therefore, I was counted as a member precisely because inclusion in the group was not based on a open confession of shared belief. With belief sidelined, my attendance and practical assistance were valued alongside the input of more long-standing members.

Given the descriptions of the two services at the beginning of the chapter, a series of parallel contrasts may now be offered. While the sermon in the St Michael's service stresses the need for members to be 'set apart' from secular culture, the *Visions* service suggests a blurring of boundaries between culture and the church. Similarly, while the St Michael's congregation defined my personal status as categorically different from their own, the members of *Visions* treated me as though I were an equal participant on the spiritual path. The contrasts between the two groups can be summarised in terms of different perspectives on modern culture, perspectives which shape norms of interaction as well as public meetings. Moreover, the fact that *Visions* exists as a development *out of* St Michael's suggests that this contrast is not a simple opposition nor a static phenomenon. At this point it will be useful to turn to the extensive literature on the relationship between evangelicalism and modernity, in order to shed light on these local patterns and as the foundation for the development of key research questions.

Evangelicalism and Modernity: Theories and Patterns

Peter Berger has noted that, of the world's religions, it is Protestant Christianity that has had the most "intense and enduring encounter with the modern world." (Hunter, 1987: 5; Berger, 1980: xii) Indeed, previous examinations of this relationship have focussed on a number of affinities. Ernst Troeltsch (1966) charted the role of sectarian Protestantism in the emergence of modern social democracy. Max Weber (1958) famously argued that Calvinistic Protestantism was instrumental in the rise of the capitalist system in Europe. More recently, David Martin (1978; 2002) has mapped the ways in which Protestantism reflects broader processes of social differentiation, drawing complex connections between Protestant revivalism and the development of

modern states. Protestantism and modernity clearly enjoy a complex and multi-faceted relationship.

Taking up the phenomenon of Protestant evangelicalism – associated with the centrality of scripture, strict moral codes and a passionate conversionism - many recent scholars have spoken in terms of movements of resistance and protest. According to this paradigm – which shapes much of the literature - evangelical groups emerge and thrive in so far as they form a response to a perceived breakdown in the moral order of secular society. They offer meaning and consistency in a context of cultural chaos. Bernice Martin expresses the argument well, in her discussion of Pentecostal revivalism in South America:

“The argument that Pentecostalism offers middle-range solutions to these problems owes something to a Durkheimian view of religion as a hedge against *anomie*, both the *anomie* of social and institutional disorder and the normlessness accompanying suddenly expanded horizons, mass mobility and the decay of older systems which had held the individual tightly within familial, communal, class and patronage frameworks.” (B. Martin, 1998: 127).

Martin’s comments reflect a common trend, whereby Protestant evangelicalism is *both explained and defined* in terms of its resistance to ‘the world’. Movements and churches are made sense of as self-conscious reactions to a set of social problems, problems for which evangelical groups promise to have the solution.

While this paradigm may be traced to theological disputes deeply embedded in the chronicles of Christian history, within contemporary sociological discussion, it depends upon a more recent set of ideas. In sum, it depends upon the commonplace argument that modernity has brought with it differentiation, complexity and a consequent breakdown of traditional social order, including the elevation of the individual and the dissolution of community. This is classically associated with

thinkers such as Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, all of whom have shaped over a century of discussion. One influential account which draws from all three, and which will be described here in detail, is that offered in Peter Berger's *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (co-written by Birgitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner), which was first published in Britain in 1974. Berger's book is especially illuminating, as it compliments his other publications on religion and has been taken up by numerous subsequent commentators analysing the fate of religion within a modern context. Berger's is also a straightforward, simplified description of a process often rendered more complex and opaque by other authors.

Modernisation and The Homeless Mind

Berger does not conceive of modernity as a fixed state or era. He rather speaks in terms of "societies more or less advanced in a continuum of modernization." (Berger, 1974: 9). In isolating key features of the modernisation process, Berger, following Weber, begins with economic factors, and the influence of technology and bureaucracy upon social institutions. He refers to these as 'primary carriers' of modernisation. He identifies pluralism as a 'secondary', but nonetheless highly significant carrier of modernisation. However, Berger does not discuss social change in terms of structural factors alone. Building on his work with Thomas Luckmann (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), he addresses the ways in which changes in the social structure affect the ways in which people define their social reality. In this respect, he adopts a classic sociology of knowledge approach.

Berger isolates technology, bureaucracy and pluralism as the dominant institutional features of modernity, and argues that each of them has a "corollary at the level of

consciousness.” (Wuthnow *et al*, 1984: 56). That is, they all contribute to the construction of what Berger would call the symbolic universe of modernity (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974: 99). The dominance of technological production generates a sense of the divisibility of reality into components and sequences, which are inter-related. Additionally, it tends to foster a problem-solving attitude towards life and a general orientation of progressivity. Bureaucratisation encourages the idea that society may be organised as a system, and that one’s affairs are to be carried out in a “regular and predictable fashion” (Wuthnow *et al*, 1984: 57), ideas exaggerated in the subsequent ‘McDonaldization’ of society described by George Ritzer (1996). These orientations are originally derived from encounters the individual has with technology and bureaucracy within key social institutions – such as education and the workplace – but there is an inevitable migration, according to Berger, into their overall perception of reality. This ‘modern’ orientation is perhaps best captured in the idea of functional rationality, the natural development of man’s imposition of rational control over the material world (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974: 202).

Whereas many other commentators have drawn attention to the importance of technology and bureaucracy to the modernisation process (e.g. Bell, 1976; McLuhan and Fiore, 1967; Weber, 1958), Berger could lay claim to some originality in his focus upon pluralism. Accelerated social differentiation – nowadays intensified by mass communications and advanced technology – engenders a situation in which individuals are exposed to a plurality of lifeworlds. They are forced to deal with the fact that many different sets of values – relating to religion, morality, politics and lifestyle choices – co-exist, even though they may clash or contradict one another. Berger contrasts this feature of modernity with pre-modern or traditional societies,

arguing that the latter offered sufficiently unified and stable value systems to foster social cohesion and secure a sense of meaning for their citizens. Modernity renders this process impossible. For Berger, the pluralism of modernity undermines social cohesion because the disparate elements of reality can no longer be integrated into a single symbolic universe (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974: 109).

Although ostensibly a descriptive account of the modernisation process, Berger's *Homeless Mind* includes a distinctively negative evaluation, captured in his comments on the 'discontents' of modernity. For Berger, the transformations bound up in modernisation undermine the cohesive power of social institutions. Their "identity defining power" is weakened (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974: 86). The increasing salience of technology brings about experiences of alienation, frustration and anomie. Bureaucratisation fosters abstraction and anonymity in the workplace. Both engender a sense of formality and a dispassionate, scientific outlook on life which fails to cater to the emotional, subjective dimensions of the human condition. Social differentiation also leads to a pluralisation of lifeworlds which undermines any cohesiveness offered in the institutional sphere. "...institutions then confront the individual as fluid and unreliable, and in the extreme case as unreal" (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974: 85).

Consequently, the individual has to fall back on his or her own subjective resources for a sense of self and social stability. In this, Berger follows Arnold Gehlen's argument that the de-institutionalisation of modernity generates a turn inward, a *subjectivisation* (Hunter, 1982). The self becomes the centre of the meaning-making process. However, because of the essentially social nature of humankind, this is a very precarious situation. Social identities require affirmation and maintenance from

durable agencies outside of themselves, i.e. from institutions and traditions. Moreover, these are required to sustain some consistency of form over time. Without these systems of support, man stands in a state of existential uncertainty, or ‘homelessness’ (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974: 86).

Religion and the Quest for Certainty

It is this model of contemporary culture – emphasising moral and symbolic anomie – which calls for fresh sources of certainty and meaning, sources which promise what Bauman has called “safety in an insecure world” (Bauman, 2001). Given his interest in the social conditions which sustain plausibility, many scholars draw from Berger in their discussions of this problem (e.g. see Hunter and Ainlay, 1986; Woodhead, 2001). Similarly, many follow his lead in seeing conservative religious movements as both responses and effective antidotes to the fragmentary chaos of the modern experience. They offer certainty in a context of perpetual uncertainty, and tend to self-consciously identify this uncertainty as a product of secular modernity. It is not surprising, therefore, that the relationship between evangelicalism and modernity is often characterised as antagonistic. Moreover, their often vociferous effort to maintain moral and symbolic – if not spatial – distance from modern norms, serves as the ongoing strategy by which conservative religious groups shape their subcultures and forge the boundaries of their identity (McConkey, 2001).

The claim that conservative Christian groups seek distance from modernity is not a novel one. Berger himself picks up on an existing trend, represented by Richard Niebuhr (1952) and Bryan Wilson (1967), which makes sense of certain sectarian developments as movements of resistance against the modern world. Berger has taken

this further, however, in claiming that these groups *need* to sustain distance in order to survive in modern contexts. Conservative groups subscribe to what Berger calls a ‘deviant body of knowledge’ (Berger, 1969: 31-2). That is, their belief systems are antithetical to the dominant norms and values of modern culture. Frequently voiced in hyperbolic polemic from either side, communalism is set against individualism, the embrace of strict moral codes defined in contrast to moral libertarianism, and patriarchal structures of authority are asserted over western norms of gender and sexual equality. It is the ideological boundaries that separate these value claims that, according to Berger, need to be accentuated lest conservative enclaves capitulate to modern influence, fragment and decline. In effect, they are best suited to fend off the onslaught of modernity by existing as a kind of ‘counter-community’, fostering homogeneity, solidarity among members and a clearly defined set of boundaries that set them apart from the outside world (Berger, 1969: 32). Moreover, while Berger was previously pessimistic about their chances, in recent work he has acknowledged the recent success of evangelical and Islamic movements, arguing for their significant resurgence in terms of his earlier position. That is, they thrive by ‘keeping modernity out’ (Berger, 1999: 6-7).

This position has been most forcefully advanced in recent discussions of fundamentalism, which historically emerged as a deliberate and self-conscious response to the liberal Modernism of the early 20th century (Barr, 1977; Hunter, 1983: 35-6). Steve Bruce focuses upon the fragmentation of life, societalisation, rationalisation and egalitarianism (particularly of gender roles), as aspects of modernity which challenge fundamentalisms and thus provoke the ire of fundamentalist groups (Bruce, 2000). In focussing upon these ‘evils’ they shape their

own movements in terms of a project of resistance. Similar arguments are advanced by Castells (1998), Kepel (1994) and by Bauman (1997), who sees fundamentalism as the quintessential religious form of post-modernity.

Many discussions of conservative or evangelical Christianity have similarly emphasised the ability of these groups to forge effective barriers against modernity, for the most part through what Bryan Wilson has called “values of protest” (Wilson, 1967: 22). In his influential assessment of growth and decline among US churches, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (1972), Dean Kelley advances a classically Bergerian argument. Observing general patterns of growth among conservative churches and a comparative decline throughout more liberal denominations, Kelley explains this by arguing that it is religions which have strict, clear and exacting demands which fair best. In other words, it is by erecting firm boundaries of faith that religious groups fend off the inevitably secularising forces of modernity. Despite his later reservations about Berger’s work (Warner, 1993), Stephen Warner (1988) makes similar claims within the context of his ethnographic study of an evangelical parish church in California. Warner argues that conservative religions engender solidarity among their members because they embrace clear teachings which are not open to a wide range of interpretations. In other words, conservative religions re-affirm the boundaries that are dissolved or undermined by modern change.

Movements of Accommodation

However, recent studies of evangelicalism in the west have tended to find widespread accommodation to modernity. James Davison Hunter (1983; 1987) has conducted several empirical studies of evangelical Christian attitudes in the USA. His work,

though not uncritical, can be read as an empirical verification of Peter Berger's claim that an absence of boundaries against modernity leads to an erosion of traditional values. Put briefly, Hunter argues that the forces of modernisation have penetrated the boundaries of evangelical religion and have initiated a 'liberalisation' of attitudes. Hunter finds a shift away from an understanding of the Bible and evangelical tradition as external, non-negotiable authorities. Instead, evangelicals are becoming more tolerant of non-Christians, less rigid in their readings of the scriptures and more open to possibilities of change within the evangelical worldview (Hunter, 1987).

His findings are echoed in the work of Richard Quebedeaux (1978) who speaks of 'worldly evangelicals', and by Mark Shibley (1996) who sees a positive embrace of certain aspects of secular culture. Writing of the British movement, David Bebbington remarks on a diversification and broadening of perspective (Bebbington, 1989: 267). Ian Hall finds a new "moderation" in evangelical convictions (Hall, 1994: 301). And David Smith sees an openness to liberal ideas, other traditions and a concerted effort to relate the Gospel to contemporary culture (Smith, 1998). An orientation characterised by resistance has apparently been superseded by one that seeks a more positive engagement with modernity.

In his study of evangelical 'new paradigm' churches, Donald Miller also finds a significant engagement with modern forces, but he rejects the Bergerian approach as overly cognitive (Miller, 1997: 75). Instead, Miller focuses on subjectivity, on the importance of an ongoing, intimate relationship with God, which caters to a need for "life-changing, affective religious experience" (Miller, 1997: 25). According to Miller, 'new paradigm' churches such as the charismatic Vineyard fellowship thrive in

part because they successfully meet this need, a need which is widespread in a society characterised by technology, bureaucracy and a lack of connectedness between people. 'New paradigm' Christians are theologically conservative, often Biblical literalists, but are progressive in their ecclesiology – fostering 'loose' organisational structures and encouraging lay leadership. Members affirm that knowledge is not just rational, but also has an important experiential element. They are firm believers in miracles, God's guidance of specific individuals and the charismatic element of worship. In other words, the 'new paradigm' embrace a kind of 'subjectivisation' – a turn inwards, to the complexities of personal experience (Hunter, 1982).

In this way the 'new paradigm' reflects developments across the charismatic movement (Walker, 1997), whereby human experience becomes a source of religious knowledge (Percy, 1996) or a source of empowerment (Coleman, 2000; Percy, 1998). They also reflect a widespread focus upon the religious life of the self (Hunter, 1982), as both site for the sacred and centre of evangelical responsibility (Heelas, 1996b; Hunt, 2001: 99-109). Together, the various aspects of subjectivisation may be seen as a response to the weakening of institutional sacred canopies and capitulation to modern individualism.

These two processes – liberalisation and subjectivisation – capture the main trajectories of change across the evangelical world as groups accommodate to wider cultural norms. Taken together, they suggest less a process of resistance, and more a process of negotiation (Briers, 1993; Miller, 1997), as particular evangelical groups – especially in the post-industrial west – engage in innovative cultural exchanges with selected pockets of the 'secular'.

This process implies a ‘deregulation’ of religion, which has, according to some commentators, gained apace under new ‘post-modern’ conditions (Lyon, 2000). Progressive evangelical groups have absorbed the markers of youth subculture into their conception of Christian identity (Jensen, 2000). Radically new communication technologies have been deployed in projects of creative worship (Flory and Miller, 2000; Guest, 2002), while the world wide web is embraced as a vehicle for evangelism (Castells, 1998: 351; Dawson and Hennebry, 1999) and as a virtual space for the fostering of ‘spiritual’ communities (Beaudoin, 1998; Zaleski, 1997). The pool of cultural resources that are deemed worthy of inclusion in the evangelical subculture is broader and more negotiable than it has ever been. To borrow a phrase from James Beckford, evangelicalism has, in many places, come adrift from its former points of anchorage (Beckford, 1989: 170).

Key Research Questions

The earlier descriptions of services in St Michael-le-Belfrey and *Visions* reveal very different presentations of what it means to be ‘evangelical’ in contemporary Britain. Reflections on my experiences in the field also reveal a curious divergence in perspectives on outsiders, with the *Visions* group blurring the boundaries of inclusion while St Michael’s affirms their importance. But the openness of St Michael’s to outsiders on a practical level suggests that it is not constructed as a ‘counter community’ to modernity (Berger, 1969). Indeed, ongoing observation revealed that both groups exhibit a significant accommodation to the norms of modern culture, not least a focus on subjective needs and on a respect for individual difference. But while a process of adaptation has occurred, it has taken a very different route in each group, and therefore has produced very different versions of the evangelical subculture.

My overall intention is to explore how modernity both erodes evangelical tradition, while simultaneously offering new channels for its reinvention in the lives of members. As stated earlier, this process is conceived as one of a negotiation with modernity, and modernity is here framed in terms of two key processes. *Liberalisation* refers to the process whereby tradition is re-conceived within a broader frame of reference and shared values effectively take on a less defined form and a more tolerant tone. *Subjectivisation* refers to the turn to the self and to experience as sources of significance. Both are addressed in terms of their impact upon patterns of belief and value among the two congregations. In addition to this, a secondary concern will be the extent to which the *Visions* group represent a distinctively ‘post-modern’ development – deregulated, rejecting overarching authorities and engaging in a reconfiguration of evangelicalism drawing from novel resources (Beckford, 1992).

My second question is: how do these developments relate to the maintenance of community within the two groups? According to Berger’s argument, liberalisation and subjectivisation mark a capitulation to modernity that brings about secularisation, chiefly through the *fragmentation of communities* (Tonnies, 1955). More precisely, the shift to a set of positions which rely upon the diffuse standards of culture, rather than the defined standards of a closed religious group or network, compromises the possibilities of sustaining cohesive and durable collectives (Bruce, 2002: 239). Accommodation to modernity is also associated with individualism, with the primacy of choice and autonomy (Taylor, 1991), rather than on inter-dependence and long-term commitment to organised groups, least of all religious ones. Modernisation and community are, apparently, inversely related and ‘world accommodating’ evangelical groups doomed to fragmentation and decline. My intention is to test this assumption,

by exploring how community is maintained alongside processes of liberalisation and subjectivisation within St Michael's and *Visions*. Does a collective and cohesive community depend upon a project of resistance, requiring an oppositional enemy for a clear sense of identity, as Berger (1969) and Simmel (1955: 97-8) argue? If so, how is this sustained given the diversification which accompanies an accommodation to modern trends?

Key research questions may therefore be summarised as follows:

- How have processes of liberalisation and subjectivisation affected the expression of evangelical Christianity in St Michael's and in *Visions*?
- Given the consequences of these processes, how does each group sustain a shared experience of community?

In comparing how each of these groups copes with modernisation, I am able to explore two alternative responses and consequent re-orderings of tradition – that of an 'experiential religion of difference' (Woodhead and Heelas, 2000) and a more experimental, liberal humanist development. Both reflect routes taken by evangelical groups across the UK, while also remaining constrained and shaped by local factors. Moreover, while both respond to similar processes of cultural change, they differ in which aspects of modernity they choose to embrace and harness for religious ends. In this sense, a deregulated religious economy creates conditions in which traditions may achieve new paths of divergence, in which the fissiparousness for which Protestantism is known may follow fresh lines of development and innovation.

A Note on the Thesis Structure

Now that I have discussed the theoretical debates in which this study will be embedded, and stated the key research questions, the remainder of the thesis will be occupied with exploring these questions within the context of the available empirical data.

Chapter two examines the relationship between modernity and the evangelical movement in Britain as a whole, and charts developments from the 1960s onwards. It argues that, as evangelicalism has expanded through new social networks, it has absorbed 'secular' trends and accommodated to the values of the wider culture. This is discussed in connection with the middle class status of the movement.

Chapter three offers an introduction to the case study, exploring trends in growth and decline, and key demographic features. The main aim here is to explore the ways in which the church is embedded in dimensions of modern change, thus allowing for an understanding of salient forces of modernisation based on the social identities of members.

Chapter four addresses the liberalisation thesis within the context of the St Michael's congregation. Questionnaire data is used alongside ethnographic description to explore the ways in which patterns of accommodation and resistance are evident. An additional section then explores how a sense of congregational unity is sustained in spite of a liberalisation of values.

Chapter five turns to the subjectivisation thesis. Drawing from examples of congregational discourse, I discuss the ways in which subjectivity has become a locus of meaning for congregants, bestowing spiritual significance upon everyday concerns and thereby serving as a counter force to secularising influence. Subjectivity is also explored with reference to charismatic rituals such as glossolalia and ‘words of knowledge’. It is argued that plausibility structures are sustained *via* a process of cross-fertilisation between informal discourse and public rituals.

Chapter six is devoted to the *Visions* group. I present a history of the group’s development before discussing its current demography and organisation. Following this appears an analysis of the ways in which *Visions* continues to reconfigure and rebuild the core aspects of its evangelical heritage, focussing on how authority is defused, on the mobilisation of the aesthetic and on the reconfiguration of shared values. The values shared by the group are then compared to the values represented within the St Michael’s congregation, *Visions* being characterised by a process of humanisation and a privatisation of subjectivities.

Chapter seven compares the two groups, but with a special focus upon how their respective cultures are defined and sustained in communal meetings. After examining the ways in which members of each group demonstrate practical commitment and an ongoing contribution to networks of support, I relate the emerging experiences of community to the patterns of shared belief and value addressed earlier. This is done with particular reference to the function of the small group, argued as a mediating factor in liberalisation and subjectivisation processes.

The concluding chapter summarises the findings of the study, before offering an extended discussion of how these shed light on the theoretical questions outlined in the introduction.

In order that the thesis proceed according to its argument, rather than by convention, I have decided to place the extended discussion of my research methods within an appendix (appendix one). Appendix two describes the pragmatics of administering the questionnaire survey, and provides a copy of the questionnaire itself. Appendix three provides a copy of the *Visions* sung creed, used as a resource to chapter six.

Note on the Text

Throughout the thesis, lengthy quotations from literature and from interview transcripts are set apart from the text in normal type. When occasion has demanded the reproduction of lengthy passages from field journals or from field notes, these have been distinguished by italic type.

Quotations from the Bible all refer to the New International Version (NIV), as this version is favoured by St Michael's parishioners and is the version set in the pews each Sunday. The exception is the passage from Ecclesiastes in chapter seven, which is taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), as this is closer to the version used in that particular *Visions* small group meeting.

CHAPTER TWO EVANGELICALISM IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLAND

Introduction

It is the purpose of this chapter to offer an overview of evangelical Christianity within contemporary England, and thereby to offer a broader context in which the movements described in chapter one can be placed. I will first offer a definition of evangelicalism before charting the growth of the movement. An historical overview of recent developments will then allow us to see how evangelicalism has adapted to its cultural context, thus setting the scene for the more detailed analysis to follow. Finally, a demographic analysis of the movement suggests a considerable middle class bias, and the implications of this for shared values are addressed.

Defining Evangelical Christianity

Observation of the use of the term 'evangelical' during fieldwork suggested that it is used to mean very different things for different individuals within the St Michael's congregation. For some it signifies a style of Christianity that is thoroughly Bible-centred, obedient to the truth of scripture and uncompromising on Biblical moral precepts. Others affirm a passion for the texts, but a creative approach to their interpretation. Others associate evangelicalism with an orientation to missionise and passionately spread the Gospel message. Some more cynical parishioners latch onto these as negative features, 'evangelical' being used as a pejorative label for a pushy or unreasonably narrow kind of Christianity. For others being evangelical means belonging to a 'live' church, a centre of revival which fosters a passionate and active faith life rare in 'non-evangelical' churches. In this way 'evangelical' incorporates personal and collective meanings, positive and negative associations, all shaped by

past experiences and present concerns. It is very much a “contested” term (Baumann, 1996), its meanings open to question and challenge from within the movement itself, a symptom of a deep-seated deregulation produced by long term, complex changes.

But these changes do not exist in a vacuum, and are framed by a set of key features. I shall follow David Bebbington, who speaks of

“...the four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.”

(Bebbington, 1989: 2-3)

Bebbington’s fourfold scheme has the advantage of tallying with numerous other attempts (e.g. Marsden, 1987: 190; Quebedeaux, 1978: 7; Shibley, 1998), whilst also drawing attention to *activism*, thus distinguishing practical as well as substantive theological dimensions. Bebbington’s scheme is also sufficiently loose to allow for changes in emphasis, highlighting key axes rather than a fixed set of credal statements.

Of course, these key features give rise to related trends, both social and theological, which are commonly associated with evangelical groups. Many embrace a moral conservatism, arising out of an expectation of strict conformity to Biblical precepts. Connected with this is the expectation of a practically demanding faith life, membership entailing moral reform and personal commitment to the group in the shape of regular, active participation in services, Bible studies, small groups and prayer meetings. As a result, evangelical communities are often close-knit and quasi-sectarian. Also, as being evangelical is bound up in a very personal commitment to Christ, the evangelical life is frequently conceived in terms of a close relationship,

described in the language of intimacy and driven by a personal experience of God's guiding presence. Entrance into the faith is assumed to be the start of an ethically pure *and* "spiritually transformed life" (Marsden, 1987: 190) This mood is most obviously foregrounded among *charismatic evangelicals*, who infuse the above features with an expressivist orientation and a thirst for preternatural moments of divine inspiration.

Cognate Terms

Most scholars base their understanding of evangelicalism on an effort to differentiate it from 'liberal' forms of Christianity, the latter conceived as 'broad' in its ecclesiology and theology, and more congenial to the moral and social changes associated with modernity. But the definition given above covers a number of diverse developments, so that it is important to differentiate among 'evangelicalisms' as well as to note its external boundaries.

While 'conservative religion' carries general connotations of a respect for the past and a suspicion of change, *Conservative Evangelicalism* has developed a more specific meaning. It has come to refer to the non-charismatic wing of the evangelical movement. Conservatives are consequently seen as more staid in their spiritual style, less given to emotion. They are also associated with a focus upon Bible study and scriptural obedience, which is retained as central, in preference to the turn to scripture *alongside* experience among charismatics. While this style of evangelicalism may also overlap with conservative politics and social values, this is not a consistent pattern and current changes warn against making generalisations along these lines.

Pentecostalism, while originally restricted to the historical denominations which emerged out of the revival at Asuza St, Los Angeles at the turn of the 20th Century (Cox, 1996), has come to refer to a certain style of spirituality across denominations. Traditional Pentecostals, churches in the Charismatic Renewal, Restorationist House Churches as well as Independent Evangelical groups, may all embrace the present reality of charismatic gifts as an historical continuation from the apostolic church. These gifts are seen as a sign of divine activity and are used as a channel for worship (e.g. singing in tongues) as well as for in-group authority (e.g. prophecy) (see Calley, 1965; Percy, 1998). The charismatic style is frequently accompanied by an evangelical theology, stressing conversionism and Biblical authority, which is conflated with experientialism to generate new understandings of power and inspiration (Cartledge, 1998; Percy, 1998). Evangelicalism is therefore sometimes fused with Pentecostal spirituality to become what Woodhead and Heelas have dubbed an “experiential religion of difference”, stressing strict authorities and moral boundaries alongside an emphasis upon personal experience (Woodhead and Heelas, 2000: 31)

Revivalism and *Millennialism* are also frequently connected with Pentecostal movements. Revivalism focusses upon the retrieval of an experience or state lost by the church; millennialism looks forward to the end times. Both invoke knowledge of immanent religious upheaval on the basis of divine inspiration. They also tend to affirm a vision of this-worldly change, based around a theocratic society or thousand-year reign of Christ himself. However, while occupying a place in early Restorationist theology (Walker, 1989), dispensationalism generally holds little sway among evangelicals in contemporary Britain (Bebbington, 1989: 264).

Finally, evangelicalism needs to be distinguished from *Fundamentalism*. Identified across religious traditions, fundamentalism is commonly defined with reference to a desire to return to a fundamental and absolute set of truths, and an aggressive rejection of the standards of secular modernity (Barr, 1977; Percy, 1996). While Christian fundamentalists share with evangelicals a faith in Biblical authority above all else and teach a life of faith which is practically as well as personally demanding, they are passionately world-rejecting. Evangelicals, by contrast, have a long history of engaging with the secular world (and increasingly with other Christian groups) as a necessary precursor to communicating the Gospel to the unconverted. Moreover, while some evangelicals embrace Biblical inerrancy (Hunter, 1983: 139-41) and thus hold beliefs which may be “fundamentalistic” (Percy, 1996: 9), many do not and, certainly, such absolutist claims to authority are rarely invoked without qualification within the British movement (Bebbington, 1994b: 373).

A Caveat

Evangelicalism is a diverse movement, and increasingly so. It may be that it is best conceived as a collective of subcultures (Balmer, 2000), forged within local contexts, in accordance with the demographics and experiences of particular congregations (Hopewell, 1987) and networks. But these phenomena are also grounded in a common set of ideas that define them as evangelical, a shared set of attributes that allows other evangelicals to recognise their fellows in the faith. I have isolated conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism as key defining features, but these are best approached as a pool of resources rather than a fixed framework or “substantive definition” (Luckmann, 1967: 42). Indeed, I would argue that an initial portrait of evangelical identity is best described as *a repertoire of ideas and common themes*, a

repertoire that can be drawn upon variously as a justification and vehicle for stasis or change, according to the shifting needs of evangelical communities. Moreover, as argued in chapter one, the capacity for flexibility has increased in recent times, opening up opportunities for creative reconfigurations in understandings of evangelical identity. Within such times, it is all the more important to retain a critical perspective on singular 'definitions' of religious movements.

Growth and Decline

Evangelical Christianity in the UK is far less popular than it is in many other nations. Drawing from the 1997 Angus Reid Group's World Survey, Mark Noll claims that 35% of the US population in may be counted as 'evangelical'. The figure is 38% for the Philippines, 33% for South Africa, 25% for Brazil, 15% for Canada and just 7% for the UK (Noll, 2001: 39-41). However, there are signs that the English tradition has achieved some growth during the post-war period. Moreover, this growth has meant a greater expansion into a broader cultural remit, in turn exposing evangelical churches to new ideas and previously alien traditions. Consequently, an analysis of an accommodation to modernity must have a consideration of evangelical growth as its foundation.

The UK Background: Decline Amongst the Churches

While secularisation theorists trace the roots of religious decline to the Reformation and further back (e.g. Berger, 1967: 126-7), my concern here is with the 1960s onwards. It was during this time that a process of sudden and steep decline began among the British churches (Brown, 2001). While the post-war period had been characterised by a general stability in the levels of church involvement (Hastings,

1987: 551), the 1960s initiated cataclysmic falls in confirmations, ordinations, membership and attendance. By 1969, the national ratio of confirmations had dropped by 32% over a 6 year period, and ordinations had dropped by 25% in 5 years (Hastings, 1987: 551). Anglican membership fell by 35% in between 1960 and 1970. The number of Easter communicants dropped by 43% during the same period (Chambers, 1999: 4). This was a pattern generally echoed across the denominations and steady decline has persisted during subsequent decades. In 1975 18.5% of the UK adult population were members of a church. By 1980 this had fallen to 16.9%, by 1990 to 14.7% (Brierley and Wraight, 1995: 240). Total Sunday attendance in England dropped by 13% in the 1980s and by 22% in the 1990s (Brierley, 2000: 32).

Scholars differ as to whether this signals a decline or transformation of religion, a drop in interest or a change of form (Bruce, 2002; Davie, 1994; Lyon, 2000). But a change of fortunes for the worse is undeniable as far as the institutional life of the English Christian churches is concerned. Indeed, the evidence is so stark that Peter Brierley, churchman and perennial student of attendance statistics, has recently described the UK churches as “bleeding to death”. (Brierley, 2000)

Signals of Evangelical Growth

Existing across the denominations, evangelicalism has been embroiled in movements of institutional decline. However, in spite of this – or perhaps in some respects because of it – the period which marked the acceleration of general church decline coincided with a movement into a period of strength and transition for the evangelicals. By the 1950s, evangelicalism had begun to grow in popularity, flourish

in its subculture and achieve a greater public presence. There was talk of a “new evangelical revival” (Bebbington, 1994b: 367). This transformation in fortunes can be traced to a number of key shifts.

(1) Evangelical Crusades

During the 1950s, mass evangelical rallies took place for the first time in modern England, often drawing impressive numbers and always achieving media exposure. In 1954, Billy Graham’s ‘Greater London Crusade’ took place in Harringay and drew over 1, 300, 000 people over a three month period. Moreover, after ten months, 64% of the previous non-churchgoers who had put themselves forward as ‘enquirers’ were still attending their new churches (Bebbington, 1989: 259). Graham’s impact was apparently more than a flash in the pan. In 1966 he returned, this time to Earl’s Court, preaching to over 40, 000 people either live or *via* closed-circuit TV. Sponsored by the Evangelical Alliance, the ‘Mission England’ crusade of 1984 was said to have reached well over 1 million people, with over 100, 000 ‘enquirers’ seeking further contact with the churches afterwards (Hall, 1994: 246-7).

Callum Brown suggests that it is easy to overstate the importance of the evangelical crusades. For many, they were merely public spectacles and few attendees were actually converted (Brown, 2001: 173). Similarly, while the 1971 “Festival of Light” raised the issue of moral permissiveness in society, it did not succeed in mobilising change in a way comparable to parallel innovations across the Atlantic (Bebbington, 1994b: 377). However, the emergence of mass rallies in the 1950s signalled a new age in which evangelicals would achieve a greater presence in the broadcasting and printing media. The mass meeting was later fostered as a medium for the Christian

festival, with the 1970s seeing the emergence of ‘Spring Harvest’ and the more liberal ‘Greenbelt’ as centres of renewal and celebration. The former saw its annual attendance levels increase 30 times over during the 1980s, to 60, 000 in 1988 (Smith, 1998: 104). If new conversions have been negligible – and the available statistics are inconclusive – the crusades set evangelicalism on a broad stage, achieving media coverage and public visibility. And while the Gospel was seen to be at work, both clergy and lay-people were given fresh opportunities to offer practical contributions to mission.

(2) Expansion through the Universities

The evangelical Inter-Varsity Fellowship (IVF) has dominated Christian culture in the universities since the post-war period, overshadowing the more liberal Student Christian Movement (SCM) from the 1950s onwards (Bebbington, 1989: 259-60; Bruce, 1984: 75f.; Edwards, 1987: 416; Hastings, 1987: 542). The universities also helped to forge links with the US evangelical movement, partly through American graduate students wishing to study under prestigious evangelical scholars like F.F. Bruce (Noll, 2001: 19-20). Growth and expansion continued: in 1948, the IVF had 2,400 members; by 1990, more than 15, 000 British students were taking part in regular IVF activities (Sinclair, 1993: 174).

The expansion of higher education means that it is likely that a smaller proportion of students are now involved in the IVF (later renamed the University and Colleges Christian Fellowship - UCCF). However, the UCCF continues to maintain a strong influence within the individual university Christian Unions. At the present time, every university Christian Union in the UK except two is affiliated to it (UCCF, personal

communication). It has a distinctively conservative doctrinal statement, stressing the Bible as inspired and infallible and Christ's final condemnation of the unrepentant (UCCF, website). The UCCF also has its own publishing house (Inter-Varsity Press) and publishes a journal, 'Themelios', aimed at providing spiritual guidance for Christian students of Theology and Religious Studies (Gilliat-Ray, 2000). For a long time it has served as the channel through which young and talented leaders have embraced the faith and passed into the evangelical churches.

(3) Expansion through Clerical Networks

As early as 1957, Maurice Wood, chairman of the Islington Clerical Conference, pointed out that among ordination candidates in the Church of England, evangelicals were more highly represented than any other church party (Bebbington, 1989: 250). In 1969, 31.2% of ordinands considered themselves to be 'evangelical' in churchmanship. By 1977, this had risen to 44.7% and by 1986, to 51.6% (Hall, 1994: 225; Saward, 1987). This corresponds with a fall in the proportion of ordinands attending theological colleges traditionally seen as catholic or tractarian, from 29.3% in 1969 to 17.2% in 1986 (Saward, 1987). Mark Noll claims that this trend persists to the present day, the majority of those in full-time ministry training in the Church of England attending evangelical colleges (Noll, 2001: 12).

From the 1960s, the popular Evangelical Anglican conferences provided a forum for debate and consolidated a sense of common identity among these clergy. Revd John Stott claimed that all of the speakers at the 1967 Evangelical Anglican conference at Keele had been conservatives, implying the welcome decline of liberalism within the churches (Bebbington, 1989: 250). The Second Evangelical Anglican Conference in

1977 further mobilised evangelical leaders. It was attended by 2, 000 delegates, representing every evangelical parish in Britain.

There has also been a notable expansion of evangelicals among senior Anglican clergy. In 1987, while more than half of all clergy claimed an evangelical affiliation, less than 16% of diocesan bishops did so. By 1993, this had risen to 30% (Hall, 1994: 256). In 1975, both archbishops – Coggan at Canterbury and Blanch at York – claimed allegiance to the evangelical camp. In 1991 the Church of England would even be admitting a charismatic evangelical into the archiepiscopacy. These changes signal a more amenable relationship with church officialdom and a new-found public confidence. Moreover, an expansion through these networks has enhanced the power and influence of the evangelical cause generally.

Congregational Growth

Alongside a heightened degree of public exposure, expansion through university networks and through church hierarchies, there have been signs of comparative growth on the ground. On the level of the individual parish church, it was the evangelicals who were enjoying most success, especially after charismatic renewal in the 1960s. Stories circulated of churches which had grown from a handful of the faithful to a congregation of hundreds. Adrian Hastings offers the examples of Holy Trinity, Brompton, St Aldates, Oxford and St Michael-le-Belfrey in York, charismatic evangelical churches in which congregations were so considerable “that the clergy could hardly cope.” (Hastings, 1987: 615)

While the stories persisted, precise statistics did not become available until the 1980s. Leslie Francis and David Lankshear (1996) surveyed over seven thousand Anglican churches over a two-year period in 1986-1988. The churches were spread throughout 24 dioceses, covering urban, suburban and rural contexts. The survey found that evangelical churches attracted fewer communicants at Christmas and Easter, and placed less importance on infant baptism and church choirs. However, evangelical churches attracted more adults to house group meetings, larger congregations over most age groups, and more children and young people through organisations like youth clubs. The authors conclude,

“Although numerically more parishes claim allegiance to the Catholic party than to the Evangelical party, it is the Evangelical churches which show most signs of vitality and growth in urban, suburban and rural areas. The Catholic churches, by way of contrast, show most signs of decay in all three areas. Indeed, the Evangelicals are on the move and the Catholics are in crisis.” (Francis and Lankshear, 1996: 19)

For a longitudinal analysis, and for figures of evangelical activity across the denominations, we must turn to Peter Brierley’s English Church Attendance Survey, administered every ten years. From 1989 onwards, Brierley has asked clergy respondents how they would describe the ‘churchmanship’ of their church. He gives them seven options: evangelical, catholic, liberal, broad, low church, Anglo-catholic, and other (allowing for an open response). It is assumed that the majority of each congregation will agree with the description offered by their minister, an assumption defended with reference to the *Congregation Attitudes and Beliefs Survey*, which apparently suggests that “about two-thirds of a congregation usually support the churchmanship of the minister of the church.” (Brierley, 2000: 51)

In his 1989 survey, Brierley asked respondents to reflect on the growth or decline of their church during the latter half of the 1980s (Brierley, 1991a: 128). Based on their

estimations of change, he arrives at a total picture that spans the last fifteen years or so. Given only three data points, we may observe general trends, though not precise fluctuations over time. Working with Brierley's figures for growth among different branches of 'churchmanship', we arrive at the following picture (fig. 1).

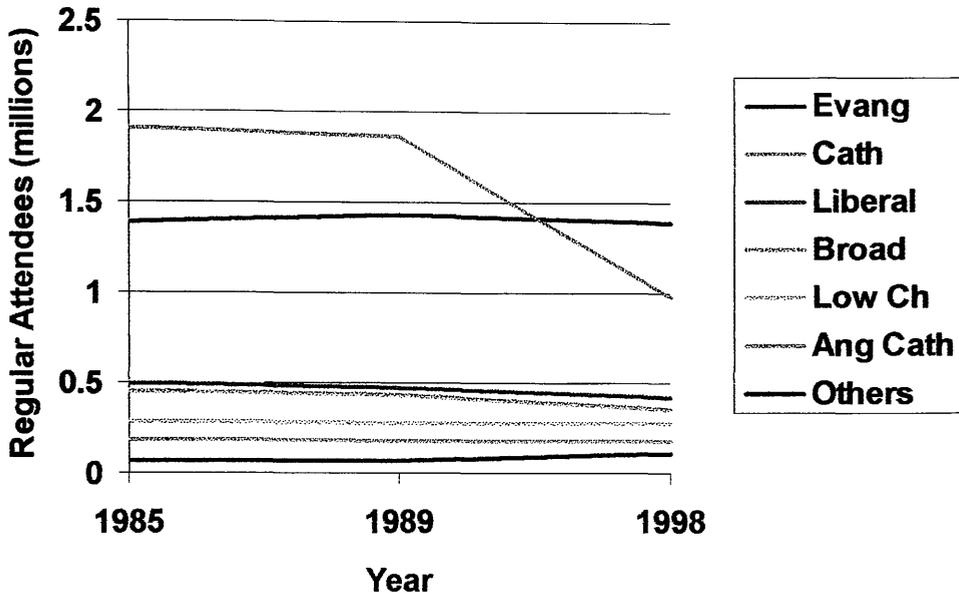


Figure One: Levels of Regular Church Attendance among English churches by churchmanship (data adapted from Brierley, 1991a: 161; 2000: 51).

Overall, evangelicals have maintained levels of popularity that far surpass churches of all other kinds of churchmanship apart from catholics, throughout the period in question. For example, liberal and broad churchgoers have failed to exceed five hundred thousand, both experiencing gradual decline since the mid 1980s. Evangelicals, by contrast, have consistently maintained numbers of almost 1.5 million.

'Catholics', a group that includes Roman Catholics but also those churches which profess a 'catholic' churchmanship, exceeded the evangelicals in the 1980s, but experienced a massive decline of 48% during the 1990s. Over the course of the past decade, evangelicals have overtaken 'catholics' as the most numerous category of

churchmanship in England. Evangelicals now constitute over a third (37.4%) of all churchgoers. Most of the other categories have also experienced some increase in their share of the total, but have remained well below the evangelicals. But although evangelicals have sustained significant strength where other groups have failed, they have not achieved significant growth either. Indeed, their numbers, after a 3% rise during the late 80s, have now fallen back to what they were in 1985, i.e. just under 1.3 million. (The only expanding category is the one reserved for 'all others', suggesting that less clergy are satisfied with the categories of the questionnaire rather than any significant growth among a defined faction.)

Brierley's most recent figures suggest that evangelical churches have the largest congregations – an average of 97 members in 1998, when the national average was 86 (Brierley, 2000: 53). Evangelical churches also boast the highest percentage of members who attend on a weekly basis – 63% (with 22% attending twice weekly), while Anglo-Catholics trail behind with 50% and liberals with 49% (Brierley, 2000: 82).

In summary, Brierley's figures suggest that evangelical churches are the most numerous in England, have the biggest congregations on average, and boast the largest proportion of committed church attenders. Although they have not increased their membership during the 1990s, they do demonstrate a greater resilience to decline than non-evangelical churches. Indeed, non-evangelicals have in fact declined "ten times as much" as evangelicals during this decade (Brierley, 2000: 65). In conclusion, although the evangelicals cannot be said to be bucking the trend of general church decline in

the UK, they demonstrate signs of vitality that outshine their non-evangelical peers in every discernible respect.

Brierley's figures also suggest changes internal to the evangelical movement. While many new churches have affiliated themselves with the evangelical camp during the past ten years, almost as many have switched to another churchmanship, almost 70% of which have become 'liberal' or 'low church'. The majority – 62% - of the newly affiliated 'evangelical' churches were previously in the 'all other' category (Brierley, 2000: 148). Simply put, evangelicalism has attracted the undecided and alienated the liberals, or perhaps evangelical ministers are becoming more liberal to the point of abandoning the evangelical label altogether. In terms of denomination, the largest proportion of English evangelicals remains in the Anglican church (24.3%). Baptists now make up 17.4% of the movement, Pentecostals 14.3% and the Methodists 9.6%. 15.5% are in the 'New Churches', a 30% rise since 1989, due to an absorption of many former independent evangelical churches into the 'New Church' networks (Brierley, 2000: 43; 151).

Available figures for attendance levels within the evangelical camp also suggest that different styles of evangelicalism have fared differently. Brierley differentiates between 'mainstream', 'broad' and 'charismatic' evangelical churches, and figures are available again for 1985-1998 (fig. 2). The high proportion of charismatics suggests that this movement was well entrenched by the mid 1980s, especially among Free Church evangelicals (Brierley, 1991a: 164-5). However, significant decline during the following decade (-16%), indicates a change of fortune. Conversely, mainstream evangelicals grew by 2% during the late 1980s, and then by a massive 68% during the

1990s. This more than makes up for the decline in charismatics, and suggests a significant shift to a centrist position across the evangelical movement. Moreover, the steepening decline of the 'broad' category suggests that those evangelicals who have abandoned the charismatic camp are uncomfortable aligning themselves with a label that has liberal, inclusivist overtones. This reflects a trend that had already taken root among Anglican evangelicals in the late 1980s, during which charismatics declined by 6% and the mainstream category expanded by 15% (Brierley, 1991a: 164-5). Evangelicalism is clearly not a static phenomenon and has experienced significant transformations in recent years. To explore this issue further, we must turn to historical sources.

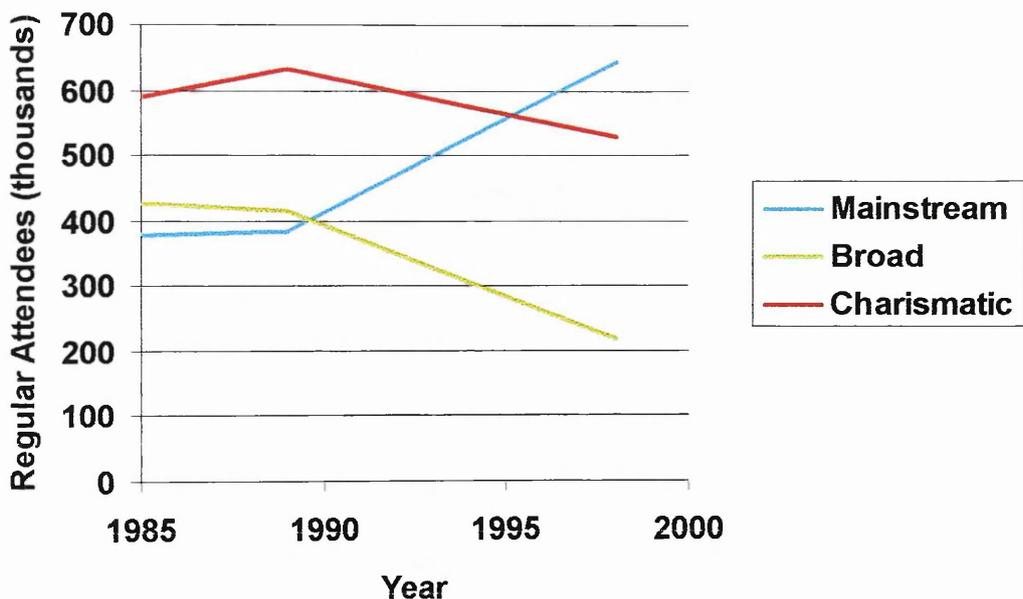


Figure Two: Changes in Attendance Levels among Different Branches of Evangelicalism in England (data adapted from Brierley, 1991a: 161; 2000: 54).

The Changing State of English Evangelicalism

The relative vitality of evangelical Christianity in recent times suggests that it has to some extent *successfully* negotiated with the forces of modernity. But negotiation

implies both dialogue and a degree of capitulation and it is clear that, as it has enjoyed congregational growth and a greater public presence, UK evangelicalism has become increasingly embedded in a broad spectrum of secular or non-evangelical agencies. It is important to ask, therefore, how recent changes within the evangelical camp reflect an accommodation to modern cultural values.

The 1960s as an Axis of Change

To argue for change at the axis of the 1960s, it is first necessary to provide some indication of what evangelicalism was like prior to this period. For this we may turn to David Bebbington, who offers an enlightening image of evangelicalism in 1940s Britain. Evangelicals were “unworldly, diligent in attendance at weekly prayer meetings, meticulous about quiet times, suspicious of the arts, missionary minded, hostile to new liturgical ideas.” (cited in Bebbington, 1989: 263) One could add to this a defensive Protestantism, the anti-institutionalism of which fostered a suspicion of ritual adornment and of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Evangelicals were austere and traditionalist, both severe in their theology and morals, and in their manner. They were ‘firm in their faith’ (Bruce, 1984) and impervious to change. The 1960s was to change all of this. By the end of the decade, all of these characteristics had either been abandoned or reconfigured by British evangelicals in a way that left the movement enduringly and irretrievably refashioned.

The period of the 1960s has been repeatedly conceived as one of cataclysmic change (e.g. Brown, 2001; Ellwood, 1994). The counter-culture carried with it a libertarian spirit, characterised by an anti-establishment ethic and an antipathy towards any kind of structure (Hastings, 1987: 584f.). But the revolts of the sixties were ideological as

well as political, driven by the values of freedom of movement and identity, individual self expression and a romantic turn towards emotional and subjective needs. The cultural revolution was as much against technocracy and rationality as it was against political dominance and militarism. Revivals in leftist, Marxist politics occurred alongside new quests to recover the natural and primitive aspects of existence. Most radically, human fulfilment became associated with having the freedom to “do one’s own thing” (Ellwood, 1994: 335; Taylor, 1991) Such values were spread and given fresh impetus by the expansion of Higher Education in England, with fourteen new universities established in the 1960s and more to follow.

At the same time great unrest ensued in some quarters. The new-found prosperity had attracted black immigrants from the mid 1950s onwards, 260,000 Caribbeans entering England between 1955 and 1962 (Hastings, 1987). This caused tension in some areas, occasionally spiralling into violence, and prompting Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in 1968. Some expressed concern at a growing moral laxness, especially among young people, as abortion and homosexuality were both legalised in 1967 and divorce was made easier in 1969 (Brown, 2001: 176). Others railed against the system, as in the student rebellions of 1968 or the emerging feminist movement. A general liberalisation of values took place across British culture, which had individualism and the respect for individual freedoms at its centre. But alongside this, political upheaval on both sides of the Atlantic – epitomised in the Cold War and Vietnam – meant that idealism gave way to disillusionment and a cynicism towards received traditions.

The 1960s marked a transition that was so radical that it would irreversibly alter western culture. Key changes could be summarised as a liberalisation of moral values; a new-found moral foundation in the integrity of humanity, expressed in racial and sexual equality; a turn to individualism, emphasising freedom to experiment as a means to fulfilment and pleasure; and the beginnings of a breakdown in inherited traditions and hegemonies, including the church, politics and nationhood.

The culture of the 1960s generated specific challenges for the traditional churches. An anti-establishment ethic, liberal morals and a turn to individualism all counted against the authority and cultural norms of Christian tradition, especially among the evangelicals. Austerity, deference to one's elders and leaders, as well as moral restraint were anathema and thus points of alienation. A turn to subjectivity reflected a yearning for new experiences, fostering an experimentalism which scoffed at convention and consistency – the mainstay of the religious establishment. And while these cultural turns are perhaps most applicable to the then youth - now known as the baby boomer generation - they capture changes which had implications across the board. Moreover, just as they signal a turn away from traditionalist religious forms, they also generated what Robert Ellwood has called a new “religious imagination”. That is, a fresh way of conceiving religion in the light of new cultural conditions. According to Ellwood, this imagination reconceived religion in terms of egalitarian community, “concerned with subjectivity” and “driven by feeling rather than highly consistent doctrine” (Ellwood, 1997: 335).

The Evangelical Response

The evangelical response to these changes was predictably double-edged. On the one hand, its conservative wing was gaining in popularity after a period of relative insignificance, to the detriment of traditionally liberal branches of the movement. This was due to a number of factors. Firstly, the liberal evangelical wing had lost much of its vigour. The Anglican Evangelical Group Movement, which had channelled liberal voices from the Church of England and Methodism, lost support as key figures died or were elevated to senior positions which kept them from engaging with such sectional movements. More persistent strains of liberalism tended to be less evangelical or were absorbed into wider secular perspectives (Bebbington, 1989; Hastings, 1987).

Secondly, developments in post-war theology were more sympathetic to conservative concerns. Of particular significance was the neo-orthodoxy represented by Karl Barth, which stressed an existential encounter with Christ that was more congenial to conservatives than liberals. Thirdly, the emergence of radical theology, despite achieving some recognition among intellectuals, held less sway on the ground, and triggered a conservative backlash. John Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963) was dismissed by conservatives like J.I. Packer, whose vitriol tallied with a popular appeal for the traditional and familiar foundations of the faith. A similar argument could be made with reference to changing moral norms, the perceived laxity of which urged some to rally to the conservative camp. As Bebbington puts it, "Conservatives gained credit for standing up for received Christian convictions." (Bebbington, 1989: 255)

But at the same time, evangelicals did not simply adopt an attitude of resistance. Studies of clergy during this time suggest a liberalisation of values, with dominant

perspectives emphasising the immanent over the supernatural, and an inclusive, humanitarian perspective over an exclusivist one (Towler and Coxon, 1979: 196-7). Comparative studies of the US movement have also charted a broadening of values and a relaxation of received norms since the 1960s (Hunter, 1983, 1987; Quebedeaux, 1978). In the UK, this process was complex and multi-faceted. A useful framework might take note of the initiation of changes which marked a gradual blurring and challenging of traditional boundaries, as evangelicals increasingly engaged with parties and movements outside of their traditional remit.

The Relaxation of Boundaries

(1) Ecumenism

During the 1960s some evangelicals began to see the ecumenical initiatives of the British Council of Churches and World Council of Churches as a capitulation to theological liberalism. In 1966, Martin Lloyd Jones, the influential London preacher, called for all evangelicals to sever their links with denominations affiliated to the WCC (Edwards, 1987: 426). John Stott, the respected rector of All Soul's Langham Place, publicly rejected this separatist approach. In doing this, he affirmed the place of evangelicals *within* their respective denominations. It had sometimes been assumed that the non-conformist, voluntarist spirit of evangelical piety was at odds with the requirements of established churchmanship. Indeed, this was a common conviction within the US movement. Stott quashed this notion by emphasising the ecclesiological aspects of evangelical responsibility. The corporate elements of evangelical duty were re-asserted alongside personal piety.

Stott re-affirmed his position on behalf of British evangelicals at the Conference on World Evangelism in Lausanne in 1974. Breaking with the more sectarian, exclusivistic sentiments of Billy Graham and the other American representatives, Stott emphasised the collective responsibility of the church over individual and non-denominational mission. Stott was an influential figure at the Conference, the elder statesman of the British movement, and effectively represented the more moderate evangelicalism that was emerging in the English churches.

Enveloped in this was a positive drive towards ecumenism. Denominational identity was no longer seen as a barrier to dialogue, and evangelicals increasingly affirmed the value in church unity. The Evangelical Anglican Conference at Keele in 1967 marked the beginnings of dialogue with Roman Catholics. By 1977, Revd David Watson was able to make the controversial claim that the Reformation had been a tragedy because of its inevitably divisive consequences. Inter-denominational unity was also fostered by the charismatic movement, which taught a faith based on a common experience of the Holy Spirit, rather than on doctrinal correctness. (Sinclair, 1993: 177).

The consequences of these developments for the construction of the evangelical worldview are twofold. First, in affirming the importance of inclusion within wider, non-evangelical institutions, evangelicals have expressed a new openness to other traditions. Second – and more crucially - the fact that evangelicals accepted that there was something to be learnt from ecumenical dialogue was “an admission that they did not possess a monopoly of truth.” (Bebbington, 1989: 249)

(2) *Social Action as Evangelism*

During the 19th Century, evangelicals were well-known for their welfare projects, focussed on relief for the poor and social reform. By the mid 20th century, however, theological controversies had forced a turn inward, and onto matters of religious truth over social welfare. But the culture of the 1960s again brought to the fore themes of social responsibility and humanitarianism, and these were taken up as new priorities by evangelical Christians.

Such a resurgence can be traced to the establishment of The Evangelical Alliance Relief (TEAR) Fund in 1968, which addressed issues of poverty in the Third World (Bebbington, 1989: 265). Moreover, the conferences at Keele (1967) and at Lausanne (1974) both expressed a fresh sense of social responsibility among British evangelicals. Embodied most visibly in TEAR Fund, this new vision conflated notions of evangelism and social outreach, emphasising aid alongside conversion. In this sense it reflected the highly influential *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, published by Ronald Sider in 1977. Understandings of 'evangelism' were effectively broadened, with missions of 'social outreach' focussed on remedying injustice and inequality. By the 1980s, there were clear signs of a return to social activism, through organisations such as The 'Evangelical Coalition for Urban Missions', which addressed inner-city poverty and violence and 'Evangelical Christians for Radical Justice', which addressed racial problems (Hall, 1994: 277).

During the 1980s, the social concern of the evangelicals was most publicly symbolised in David Sheppard, Bishop of Liverpool, and in his groundbreaking volumes such as *Bias to The Poor* (1983). Of recognised evangelical background but

advancing a progressive vision for urban regeneration, Sheppard represented a “growing minority amongst evangelicals for whom politically radical positions” could “coexist with orthodox theology.” (Medhurst and Moyser, 1988: 138) Whereas evangelicalism had been previously associated with Conservative political allegiances, Sheppard addressed issues of urban poverty and deprivation in a way that often took an oppositional stance to the Thatcherite government of the time. Work such as his offered a point of convergence for churchmen of divergent theologies, and thus opened the way for new opportunities for ecumenism, as demonstrated by Sheppard’s collaborative work with the Roman Catholic Archbishop, Derek Worlock.

Left-wing evangelical voices could also be heard in the magazine *Sojourners* and through the American radical Jim Wallis, who criticised conservative Christianity for being complicit in the social inequalities of western culture (Smith, 1998: 114; Wallis, 1983). For Wallis, it is the new religious right who are excessively worldly, in conflating capitalist and consumerist values with the Gospel. However, evangelical social action has rarely strayed into British politics, and evangelicals maintain a sensitivity towards matters ‘worldly’ that is often expressed as a rejection of left-wing concerns. *Third Way*, an evangelical journal offering social and political comment, became independent from its evangelical publishers in 1987 after accusations of ‘left-wing’ leanings (Hall, 1994: 276). Even so, it had attained a circulation of over 3, 000, its readers representing a liberal-minded wing amongst the evangelical populace. David Bebbington draws attention to this diffuse faction, highlighted in newspaper preferences. In 1977, 60% of those attending the National Evangelical Anglican Congress took *The Daily Telegraph*. In 1986, *Third Way* offered a breakdown of its readership: 52% read *The Guardian* and 32% *The Times* (Bebbington, 1989: 267).

Moreover, many regulars at ‘Greenbelt’ – similar in orientation to *Third Way* - explain their allegiance with reference to the spiritually ‘narrow’ and apolitical feel of ‘Spring Harvest’. It could be argued that a significant left-wing minority continues to exist among British evangelicals, supporting open spiritual dialogue and political engagement. A notable spokesperson for this outlook is Graham Cray, one time vicar of St Michael-le-Belfrey, York and currently Bishop of Maidstone. In the Restorationist journal *Tomorrow Today!*, Cray has argued that the demands of the Kingdom of God extend beyond those within the church, and requires “both the challenging of dominant political ideologies and the announcement of good news to the economically poor and the socially powerless.” (Smith, 1998: 111)

James Davison Hunter identifies a related strand in the US, the “radical” or “young” evangelicals, whose voice can be heard in journals such as *Sojourners*, *Radix*, *Seeds* and *Inside*. They are social action oriented and distinguishable by their tendency to advocate social ministry as an end in itself, i.e. independent of conversion-based evangelism (Hunter, 1987: 42). Richard Quebedeaux also associates them with an appreciation of the arts, the abandonment of traditional moral taboos and a generally more positive engagement with the ‘secular’ sphere (Quebedeaux, 1979: 81-142)

The politicisation of evangelical notions of mission has really only taken place among a small minority. However, the tendency to conceive of mission as social aid rather than purely a project to convert others is arguably one that is pervasive throughout the English movement. Indeed, it has informed strategies for both overseas mission and for mission to the unchurched at home. For example, projects in ‘friendship’ evangelism attempt to approach young people on their own cultural terms and also de-

emphasise the more confrontational, potentially offensive aspects of the Gospel message. Pete Ward, an evangelical who is also the Archbishop of Canterbury's advisor for youth work and leader of Oxford Youth Works, argues that youth ministers should continue to engage with young people regardless of whether they convert or not, as a "sign of 'grace', that is the free gift of God's love in Christ." (Ward, 1995: 29) Rather than conversion, the main goal of Christian relational care should be "To move towards the good", involving "an appreciation of corporate, community-based issues and a desire for justice." (Ward, 1995: 36)

The consequences of these changes for the resilience of evangelicalism to modernity are obvious. In so far as mission is conducted along ethical or pastoral, rather than purely conversionist lines, evangelicals are all the more exposed to discourses external to the movement itself, both religious and secular. But more importantly, the more that conversion is treated as optional or secondary, the less likely it is that assent to the core values of the faith will be treated as obligatory and necessary for all. Binding and timeless truth is transmuted into optional choice. The boundaries of the faith are being blurred, and what were once treated as non-negotiable teachings are being opened up for reconfiguration at the popular level.

(3) The Embrace of Popular Culture and the Arts

The 1960s also saw the beginnings of a long-standing exchange between evangelicalism and popular culture, including the arts (Brown, 2001: 180). This was partly driven by the charismatic movement, which ushered in a new age of creativity in worship. But it was also a consequence of the fact that pop culture itself – music, fashion and other sub-cultural markers - had become inextricably bound up in the

identities of young people, including evangelical Christians. Church leaders became increasingly sensitive to the fact that, if churches were to appeal to young outsiders, and retain young converts, they would have to adopt the stylistic media of popular culture. The slogan of the evangelical organisation 'Youth for Christ' was "Geared to the Times but anchored to the Rock". This conviction, carried forward by enthusiastic young leaders, gave birth to a wealth of artistic creativity, mostly expressed in new worship forms, but also in creative evangelism that exploited drama and dance alongside rhetorical proclamations of the Gospel message. Evangelicalism's 'cultural austerity' was to give way to an increasingly colourful and artistically abundant subculture.

The inroads that evangelicalism made into popular music were advanced at various age levels. *Buzz* magazine catered to the teenage market for Christian pop. Launched in 1964, it had attained a circulation of more than 30,000 by 1981 (Bebbington, 1989: 263). 1974 saw the beginnings of the 'Greenbelt' Christian rock festival, which soon established an appeal to older teenagers and young adults, promoting Christianity through the arts as well as offering forums for the debate of topical ethical and theological issues. In 1979 it drew an attendance of 2,700; by the mid 1980s, this had grown to nearly 30,000. Evangelicals were beginning to use pop cultural media in the expression of their faith, whether for worship - as with the publication of *Youth Praise* in the late 1960s, and the light folk pop worship of the 'Fisher Folk' in the 1970s - or for evangelism, through festivals and crusades. The 1980s saw the beginnings of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), and the emergence of Christian artists onto the secular pop scene, though they achieved far more credibility in the US than in the UK.

This blurring of boundaries between evangelicalism and popular culture has been a two-way process. While churches baptised pop media for their own ends, representatives of pop culture made inroads into evangelicalism. Cliff Richard converted whilst attempting to retain popularity as an artist, as did Rick Wakeman of progressive rock band 'Yes'. Even Bob Dylan, who was actually born a Jew, flirted with born again Christianity, famously voicing his new-found faith on his 1979 *Slow Train Coming* album. Evangelicalism has been thrust into the public spotlight, open to comment and criticism, but also to emulation by those find a new credibility in the associations of popular culture.

The most radical embrace of pop culture from within the evangelical camp was undoubtedly triggered by the infamous Nine O'Clock Service (NOS), which was established in Sheffield in the mid 1980s (Howard, 1995). Established by a group of young evangelicals, NOS was founded on the belief that the church had lost touch with Britain's youth and had become politically and morally apathetic. Their response was to start a new Sunday service in connection with their home church, St Thomas's, Crookes. Worship was charismatic and multi-media, employing advanced visual and audio technology, and the favoured music was house and techno, in reflection of the popular 'rave' culture of the time (Malbon, 1999; Redhead, 1993; Saunders, 1995). Soon, hundreds of young people were attending services each week, drawn to both the 'cutting edge' worship as well as to the NOS message of ecological responsibility, social justice and radical Christian commitment. Those most committed to the project lived communally in local houses, pooling their financial resources and mobilising support for the evangelistic initiatives of the church. Organisational structures were hierarchical, with an expectation that members submit to the authority of a series of

elders, a system not unlike the discipling common among House Church groups (Walker, 1989). Theology was radical but strict, emphasising the exacting demands of scripture within the practical lives of members. Its sense of being tuned into the subcultural ‘cutting edge’ was original and unequalled within the church. Ecclesiastics championed NOS as successful evangelism – an exciting sign of the vibrancy of Christian youth within an otherwise moribund church.

But the dream did not last. The Nine O’Clock Service collapsed in 1995 amidst accusations of sexual abuse and abuse of power directed at Revd Chris Brain, its self-styled leader and spiritual guru. Many members suffered psychological trauma as a result of their involvement. However, before the service fell into disrepute, it acted as the inspiration for a whole host of other new services that were to imitate the NOS vision. The ‘alternative’ worship (or ‘alt.worship’) movement embraced the multimedia worship pioneered at NOS, but rejected the strict authority structures that had been instrumental in its downfall (Roberts, 1999: 12). By the mid 1990s, a growing number of small service groups had established themselves in connection with evangelical churches all over the country. Groups have tended to give themselves aphoristic names, chosen as if to convey a sense of both mystery and vitality, whilst deliberately and implicitly questioning the boundaries between religion and pop culture. London is the home of *Abundant*, *Grace* and *Vaux*, *Joy* are based in Oxford, *Be Real* in Nottingham and *Visions* in York.

Groups remain unconnected institutionally, but participants tend to operate within a defined network, swapping worship resources and engaging in dialogue *via* web discussion lists or at the ‘Greenbelt’ festival. Alternative worship has even spread

from the UK to the USA and to Australasia, although there are subtle differences in emphases and popularity (Roberts, 1999; Riddell, Pierson and Kirkpatrick, 2000). In the UK, alt.worship is shaped by an effort to create environments in which culturally authentic experiences of God and worship are possible, and groups are therefore driven by the perceived subcultural identities of members. The movement exists in small, often close-knit groups, which stress the importance of in-group support in the continued fostering of a 'safe' space for the open exploration of spirituality. Although showing no signs of significant numerical growth, the movement continues to enjoy a strong public presence at Anglican youth events for progressive worship, such as the millennial celebration 'Time of Our Lives' and always at 'Greenbelt'. However, the *avant garde* style of alternative worship continues to attract some suspicion from mainstream evangelicals, who often associate it with the deplored 'New Age' (Saliba, 1999). In this sense, alt.worship has absorbed popular culture to a degree that has left it unrecognisable as an evangelical initiative to many within the wider movement.

In addition to a general broadening of boundaries, further movements have signalled more distinctive developments, suggesting a creative negotiation with modern trends. Here, I isolate the recent development of the charismatic movement, followed by the more recent *Alpha* and post-evangelicalism.

The Charismatic Movement

According to Rodney Hall, the first recorded case of charismatic renewal within the Church of England occurred in 1963, at St Mark's, Gillingham, the church led by Revd John Collins (Hall, 1994: 106-7). A year later, in 1964, 'The Fountain Trust' was established by Michael Harper. The Trust served as an agency for the promotion

of Renewal within the mainstream denominations, through conferences and a bi-monthly journal, *Renewal*, which was also edited by Harper (Hall, 1994: 108). While the charismatic movement had sectarian dimensions, i.e. in the House Churches (Walker, 1989), charismatic renewal has largely been contained within existing denominations. By 1989, there were almost as many charismatics in the Church of England as in the rest of the Restorationist churches put together (Bebbington, 1994b: 371; Brierley, 1991b: 52). And while many evangelicals were hostile to these developments (Edwards, 1987: 424; Hastings, 1987: 619), the charismatic movement had a radical effect upon a large proportion of English evangelicals – over 40% attending ‘charismatic evangelical’ churches by the mid 1980s (Brierley, 1991a: 161).

While phenomenologically similar to traditional Pentecostalism – embracing the manifestation of charismatic gifts – the renewal movement was distinct in several respects. Firstly it was predominantly middle class, whereas Pentecostalism had remained a working class phenomenon. But more significantly, it had what Andrew Walker calls a different “tone”, suggestive of a more genteel set of revisions rather than a radical overhaul of existing tradition. Worship was less emotionally extreme, music more congenial to modern trends than old style hymns. Transformation was through inner as well as physical healing. Effectively, charismatic renewal was Pentecostalism “redefined by class, taste and the late modern preoccupation with therapy and self-fulfilment.” (Walker, 1997: 30)

Andrew Walker places the heyday of the charismatic movement in the 1970s, a period of charismatic resurgence among congregations and clergy. The 1980s and 90s, while charting additional growth, also saw rapid and radical change. One strand has seen a

move towards unification and an ironing out of sectarian and phenomenological differences. By the early 1990s, the Evangelical Alliance had persuaded most of the Restorationist groups to join them and Spring Harvest – under the influence of Clive Calver – had become a generic charismatic celebration, a “catch-all charismatic supermarket”, as Walker puts it (Walker, 1997: 33). This is symptomatic of a levelling process, whereby Pentecostals, renewalists and independent charismatics have become indistinguishable in terms of their practices, songs, myths and favoured gurus. In this respect, charisma has become routinised, and charismatic phenomena merely serve as a repertoire of spiritual resources to dip into according to changing practical and devotional needs (Percy, 2002). Part of this repertoire has been healing services, variously interpreted in terms of inner healing or physical remedy and practised by laying on hands, counselling or through more meditative methods. Over 70% of UK charismatic churches currently hold such healing services (Brierley, 2000: 178).

At the same time, a series of upheavals have intensified and dramatised charismatic experience, prompting significant backlash. In 1984, John Wimber first brought his ‘signs and wonders’ ministry to the UK. Initially welcomed through his connection with David Watson, Wimber exerted a significant influence over British evangelicalism throughout the 1980s. Wimber’s ‘power evangelism’ (Wimber, 1985) proceeded from the premise that evangelism should include the public demonstration of the present reality of divine miracles, including healings and prophecies. This was later dubbed the ‘third wave’ of charismatic renewal and prepared the way for the Toronto Blessing in 1994. The ‘blessing’ emerged from the Toronto Airport Church, at which possession by the gifts of the Spirit had become manifest in hysterical laughter, uncontrollable weeping, bodily jerking, shaking and animal noises, and

generally extreme physical activity (Hunt, 1995; Richter, 1997). It quickly spread all over the charismatic world, though its intensity meant that it burnt itself out within the space of a few years.

Unsurprisingly, the Toronto Blessing prompted widespread accusations of hysteria, and has generated fracture and disillusionment among churches. John Wimber's Vineyard fellowship severed links with the Airport Church in 1995, and criticisms have focussed upon an unchecked abandon (some manifestations had semi-erotic overtones) and theological vacuity (Percy, 1996: 153). The autocratic structures of the 'third wave' have also contributed to a growing cynicism among both charismatics and within the wider church. Its subjectivisation of authority has been open to abuse, to the misuse of authority by dominant individuals and the consequent domination and maltreatment of the marginalised. Observers recall a classic and sobering case in the Nine O'Clock Service, which was originally inspired by Wimber's preaching during a 1985 visit to Sheffield.

There is a sense in which the performative, supernaturalist facets of evangelicalism are now treated with an added caution and with an air of suspicion. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that the number of charismatics among evangelicals has declined by 16% during the 1990s while 'mainstream' evangelicals have increased by 68% (Brierley, 2000: 146). This is radical turn around from the 1980s, when growth among evangelicals could almost entirely be accounted for with reference to its charismatic wing (Brierley, 1991a: 164-5). The charismatic growth of the 1980s has given way to decline and a return to the subtleties of a centrist position.

Alpha

While the 1990s is now widely viewed as an ineffective ‘decade of evangelism’, the *Alpha* course has to be noted as an exception. Initially launched in 1979 as a modest refresher course for lapsed Christians, it has, over the past few years, exploded into a successful tool of global evangelism. In 1991, there were four churches running *Alpha* courses; by 1999, the number quoted by its organisers was 11,430, based all over the world in prisons and universities as well as in local churches. It is said that over one million people have completed the course since 1995. *Alpha* has produced a Christian industry of its own, including accompanying video and audio cassettes as well as promotional material like sweatshirts and car-stickers. Nicky Gumbel’s *Questions of Life* (2001), on which the course is based, is reported to have sold around 200,000 copies (Hunt, 2001: 5-6). The course has also received significant media attention, with substantial revenues securing bill-board evangelism and television interest resulting in a much hyped, if lukewarmly received, documentary series in 2001. Meanwhile, newspaper reportage has focussed upon celebrity *Alpha* converts, including former page three model Samantha Fox and disgraced Tory politician Jonathan Aitken.

Alpha’s birth-place and administrative centre is Holy Trinity church in Brompton (HTB), a hub of charismatic evangelical innovation throughout the 1980s. *Alpha* has also helped to make it the richest single church in Britain, with an annual income in 1999 of £5.1 million. The *Alpha* course is the brain-child of Nicky Gumbel, curate of HTB and perennial front-man for the *Alpha* movement. Working from the assumption that successful evangelism depends upon minimising the cultural boundaries between the church and its ‘target’ audience, Gumbel has devised a 15-week course which

plays down proclamation and confrontation and rather seeks to nurture potential converts in a 'safe' and comfortable environment. In practice, this means sharing a meal, listening to an informal lecture and discussing arising issues in small groups. Each week is devoted to a set topic - e.g. prayer, Jesus, resisting evil - which is addressed in accordance with the guidelines set out in the *Alpha* literature. Towards the end of the course, participants are invited to a weekend or day away, and spend their time considering the Holy Spirit. Talks and discussion proceed as usual, but there is also a session during which the leader will call upon the Spirit to fill those present. Glossolalia and emotional responses are not uncommon, and this is often a point of decision for the cynical or newly committed. In this way, according to its organisers, *Alpha* responds to certain basic needs in today's society, by offering: 1. straightforward answers to existential questions (what is the meaning of life? what will happen when I die?), and 2. An encounter with the spiritual.

While official in-house statistics are impressive, it is unclear how many of those who complete *Alpha* were formerly non-churchgoers. Equally vague is the extent to which *Alpha* graduates subsequently make a lasting commitment to a church. Cynics would claim that the style of the course translates into a certain attenuated Christian commitment – non-threatening, gentle and easily slotted into one's current schedule. But aside from this, *Alpha* is undoubtedly a channel for a particular kind of charismatic evangelicalism: theologically conservative yet expressed in simple narratives and dichotomies; charismatic but not vociferously so; affirming the importance of in-group support and affective relationships; encouraging moral reform in the light of spiritual warfare; and stressing uncompromising boundaries between Christianity and other religious movements. These themes are gently but consistently

affirmed and are entrenched in the course resources, now subject to copyright law as a guard against ‘unsound’ local deviations.

Alpha has not been without its critics. Liberals object to its inherent suggestion that the charismatic evangelical way is the only route into Christian faith, and point to the lack of space given to doctrine, the church or Christian history in the *Alpha* agenda. Others point to its decidedly middle class appeal: the sit-down meal, lecture and discussion groups may resonate with the university set; they hold little familiarity for many working class people. Some churches have responded by developing their own courses. In an erudite critique, Pete Ward has interpreted *Alpha* using George Ritzer’s ‘McDonaldization’ thesis (Ritzer, 1996), demonstrating how *Alpha* courses are designed and executed according to the values of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. Ward warns that *Alpha* may promote religious uniformity and stifle creativity among new converts. In reducing evangelism to a predictable and ‘comfortable’ process, *Alpha* risks trivialising Christian commitment in deference to consumerist values (Ward, 1998).

Post-Evangelicalism

In 1995, Dave Tomlinson, a former House Church leader, published *The Post-Evangelical*. Tomlinson’s book is both a description and comment upon changes already in motion, and a positive call for their understanding and development. He proceeds from the premise that present-day evangelicalism has been shaped by the culture of modernity, but that many individuals – ‘post-evangelicals’ – relate more to a culture of post-modernity. This dissonance leads to mutual misunderstanding and to some individuals abandoning spiritual homes that no longer have meaning for them.

Tomlinson embraces liberal scholarship in claiming that faith and culture are inextricably entwined. Therefore, he argues that the faith of post-evangelicals should be evaluated within the context of an understanding and appreciation of post-modern culture, including its critique of truth, tradition and authority (Tomlinson, 1995: 9).

The post-modern frame of reference, according to Tomlinson, calls for a radical rethinking of how the Gospel is perceived (Tomlinson, 1995: 26). In spite of notions of cultural chaos which pose a threat to religion, he favours a positive engagement rather than a retreat into the old certainties of modernity. This involves a move away from the 'parental' authority which characterises the relationship between evangelicals and their church leaders. Tomlinson describes this as a child-like mode of compliance to an unquestioned and dominant authority (Tomlinson, 1995: 53) and connects this trend to the urge to insulate the 'faithful' from outside forces which may have a corrupting influence. In contrast, Tomlinson highlights the need to allow individuals the freedom and space to think through their faith lives in dialogue with their experience, encouraging thought which is open-minded, creative, reflective and holistic (Tomlinson, 1995: 59). He extends this into a critique of the scientific nature of evangelical language – typically rational, propositional and absolute – and calls for a recognition of the value of poetic language. Ambiguity, intuition and symbolism carry more resonance in a post-modern world, and have the advantage of provoking rich, open-ended debate about truth and meaning (Tomlinson, 1995: 90). Running throughout Tomlinson's book is the autonomous, but sincere and responsible search for truth, replacing doctrinal or textual conformity as the essence of Christian faith.

Tomlinson's is a radical rethinking that to many is an abandonment of evangelicalism altogether. As Martyn Percy comments, "How can 'core' doctrines be rescued in a cultural scheme that contents itself with surface meanings?...who decides which are the core doctrines?" (Percy, 1996b: 359) And yet Tomlinson insists that his intention is to "*take as given many of the assumptions of evangelical faith*, while at the same time moving beyond its perceived limitations" (Tomlinson, 1995: 7, my emphasis). While he advocates a kind of spiritual *bricolage*, it is not without limits. It is, as Tomlinson says, "plurality without a necessary collapse into pluralism and relativity, without sinking into the 'anything goes' of relativism." (Tomlinson, 1995: 83) But what are these limits? Tomlinson is notably vague, preferring on all counts to encourage a spirit of questioning rather than prescribe a set of firm guidelines. He distances himself from the discursive reductionism of Don Cupitt, the Enlightenment project of modern liberalism, and from the apparently limitless experimentalism of the New Age. But his rootedness in evangelicalism is manifest in inversions rather than consistencies. The Christ event, and its portrayal in scripture, form the zenith of revelation, but is given to us in symbolism and metaphor, the cultural distance between ourselves and the Biblical writers calling for continued reinterpretation (Tomlinson, 1995: 115). And while Tomlinson clearly advocates the provision of 'safe' contexts in which spirituality may be explored communally, he prescribes no formal ecclesiology and appears to be happy conceiving Christianity as a non-structured, individualistic network. Tomlinson follows Donald Miller's (1981) concern that liberal Christianity may, in engaging with culture, actually end up mirroring it. His guard against this – amounting to a call for communal reflection, allowing scripture to "fund our deliberations" and maintaining an uncompromising

integrity – is characteristically vague and radically open-ended for one claiming an evangelical (or at least quasi-evangelical) position (Tomlinson, 1995: 136-7).

In short, Tomlinson's vision of post-evangelicalism is a theological legitimation of Beckford's sociological portrayal of religion in the contemporary west. Where Beckford sees religion as a "cultural resource" (Beckford, 1989), Tomlinson points to the capacity of Christianity to fund the post-modern imagination (Tomlinson, 1995: 142). Both imply detraditionalisation and the relocation of the locus of spiritual authority within the experience of the individual seeker. Truth is to be found in a series of resources and traditions which are not restricted to Christian convention or ecclesiastical dictate. Moreover, and most importantly, truth needs to be "grasped in ways that are personally authentic" (Lynch, 2002: 40).

Tomlinson's book is most significant in that it marks a change across the evangelical world at large. His reflections have been prompted by conversations with disenchanted evangelicals, not least through *Holy Joes*, the 'alternative church' which Tomlinson convenes as a low-key discussion group in a London pub (Tomlinson, 1995: 12-13). There are signs that many more have found a kindred spirit in Tomlinson and some have gathered together to form new communities of faith, stressing mutual support and spiritual exploration over correct doctrine and religious authority (Cray *et al*, 1997; Riddell, Pierson and Kirkpatrick, 2000). Many of the alternative worship groups fall into this category (Guest, 2002; Roberts, 1999), typically forming enclaves of individuals dissatisfied with conventional evangelicalism and seeking a more open approach to meaning.

Comment: Accommodation and Resistance

Discussing the US evangelical movement, James Davison Hunter describes the twentieth century in terms of rapid change, characterised by a broadening of shared conceptions and a corresponding weakening in the plausibility of old assumptions. He cites Mary Douglas (1966), noting that change, ambiguity and compromise “have always been the enemies of purity” (Hunter, 1987: 186). As evangelicals have increasingly engaged with institutions and ideas outside of their traditional remit, so they have capitulated to various facets of the secular modern order. While in the UK, evangelicals have not enjoyed the wealth, power or position of religious hegemony that applies to their counterparts in the USA (Bebbington, 1994b; Noll, 2001), a comparable process has clearly occurred. Evangelical tradition has become embroiled in wider changes, and has absorbed media, norms and standards external to its subculture. These inevitably have a bearing on shared attitudes on the ground. But how can we characterise these changes, and what do they reveal about shifting priorities or trends in belief?

David Smith suggests that evangelicals endorsed what was actually a *liberal agenda* at the National Evangelical Anglican Conference at Keele in April, 1967. The resulting ‘Keele Statement’ committed evangelicals to “social concern, ecumenical activity as loyal members of the Church of England, and a determination to relate the Gospel meaningfully to the modern world” (Smith, 1998: 89-90). It is testimony to the pivotal role of the 1960s that these have remained priorities for Anglican evangelicals ever since. To be fair, social concern has fluctuated over time, achieving prominence in the 1980s but arguably flagging under the more individualistic emphases of the 1990s. Paradoxically, ecumenism appears to have dissipated as a project precisely because of the perceived meaninglessness of denominational boundaries. In that sense,

evangelicals have achieved the dialogue originally intended, but have lost much of the ecclesiological diversity that once characterised differences between Anglicans, Baptists and Methodists. This has of course been helped along by normalising movements like the *Alpha* course, which has arguably refocused evangelical culture into a fresh perspective, with no obvious reference to ecclesiology or churchmanship.

Engagement has also brought with it an accommodation in moral norms. Notable are a decline in the maintenance of taboos relating to alcohol or the cinema, due to a weakening fear of the contamination of ‘the world’ (Bebbington, 1994b: 368). In this sense, moral behavioural standards have been relaxed. An openness to intellectual and scholarly dialogue also encourages a more complex and nuanced understanding of faith, especially among middle and upper class evangelicals who possess the cultural capital to engage in these resources without betraying their social identities. We may also note the tendency to absorb modern norms of cultural tolerance and extend them into religious and moral issues, a trend that Hunter sees as a response to pluralism (Hunter, 1987: 152). Rodney Hall perceives this among UK evangelicals in terms of an avoidance of extremes and a moral diplomacy. Taking the issue of abortion, he comments that, although some evangelicals may be incensed by this, most prefer to

“...register their opposition through the ballot box, or simply ignore the whole issue until it becomes ‘their problem’. Extreme positions on any issue are less acceptable among evangelicals today. Moderation in belief and expression characterises both modern society and Evangelicalism as part of that society.” (Hall, 1994: 301)

According to one interpretation, therefore, attitudes have become liberalised and beliefs more profoundly defined by the wider cultural climate. However, it is important to note that no attitudinal survey data is available at this stage for the national movement (cf. Hunter, 1983; 1987). Therefore, arguments for a liberalisation of values need to be extrapolated from institutional change and general observation.

The take up of liberal perspectives will also inevitably be conditioned by factors of social class, differences between leaders and parishioners (Edwards, 1987: 431), and to some extent denominational identity (Martin, 2002: 68).

This 'liberal agenda' has certainly opened up a wider remit in which evangelicals may make sense of their faith. Engagement with external institutions, some of them previously anathema, has opened up opportunities for evangelism and for the reconception of core ideas. *Alpha* has harnessed methods drawn from management culture while keeping fundamental charismatic evangelical standards intact. Post-evangelicals embrace an ethic of questioning, given meaning and legitimacy by post-modern philosophy and which, almost by definition, resists the closure necessary for a sustainable project of reform. Meanwhile, the charismatic movement has intensified the evangelical focus upon subjective experience and mobilised new opportunities for empowerment and authority. A softer, 'affective' strand in its development has secured a place for healing and the sharing of problems in small groups (Walter, 1995). The contemporary movement is strongly characterised by an affective individualism alongside expectations of practical commitment, features which tally with Ellwood's portrayal of the 'religious imagination' of the 1960s, detailed earlier (Ellwood, 1997: 335).

But while a general structural – and to some extent attitudinal – broadening has taken place, this exists as a steady, often unacknowledged process beneath a public oscillation between liberal progression and conservative backlash. A striking example of the latter would be 'Reform', a pressure group established in 1993 by a group of clergy from large conservative evangelical parishes. Endorsing the authority of

scripture, the uniqueness and finality of Christ and the complementarity of the sexes, 'Reform' has criticised the Church of England, including centre-ground evangelicals, for being morally and theologically adrift. They have focussed particularly on opposing the ordination of women, and on criticising the Church for not taking an unequivocally condemnatory stance on homosexuals (Steer, 1998: 331). The Evangelical Alliance's publication of its report on the nature of hell in Spring, 2000 may be treated as a similarly conservative move but within the evangelical centre ground. The report contradicts the official Church of England position that hell exists as a state of separation from God, instead arguing that hell constitutes a place of eternal damnation and punishment and should be taught as such to school children (Bates, 2000).

Thus while UK evangelicalism makes its way along what would seem to be an inevitable and irreversible inroad amongst the forces of modern change, its various constituents react in different ways to this process. Though rarely named as such because of its negative connotations, 'liberalisation' as a self-conscious project is evident, but only among relatively marginalised or diffuse enclaves. Evangelical academics and post-evangelical alt.worshippers have less of a public voice than the Evangelical Alliance or Holy Trinity, Brompton. These relatively conservative agencies continue to react against what they see as corrupting, worldly powers, though their tone is markedly more gentle than many of their predecessors, focussing upon the moral anomie of modernity rather than the evil of Roman Catholicism. While content to exist as a kind of hybrid of modern trends, evangelicals are nonetheless still concerned with policing their own boundaries: *there has to be a project of resistance* even if it is sporadic and even though inconsistent with changes within the movement.

For it is the visibility of resistance that sustains a sense of the set apart nature of evangelicalism, set apart, that is, from non-evangelical churches and from the culture which it has so extensively absorbed into its remit.

Sleeping with the Enemy? The Proximity of UK Evangelicalism to Modern Forces

More light may be shed on the extent to which UK evangelicalism is embedded within the forces of modernity by examining demographic factors. In his analysis of the US movement, Hunter (1983) found that evangelicals were more likely to be in low income employment, have relatively low levels of educational achievement, vote republican rather than democrat and live in the southern, rural areas, rather than in the coastal or urban metropolis, than their liberal or secularist peers. Although recent research suggests that US evangelicals have become more upwardly mobile during the 1990s, they are still more likely than their liberal peers to classify themselves as lower income and lower status (McConkey, 2001). In other words, the evangelical community are both “sociologically and geographically distant from the institutional structures and processes of modernity.” (Hunter, 1983: 60) Moreover, in subsequent research, Hunter (1987) found that US evangelicals liberalise as they become more upwardly mobile. As more evangelicals engage in higher education, and consequently experience class and geographical mobility, so they become more and more enveloped in the forces of modern change. It is through such processes that shared values are subjected to a reconfiguration and rethinking that predominantly equates to a liberalising shift.

Although no comparable survey data exists, a cursory examination of the available resources reveals that the situation in the UK is quite different. First, although many

Pentecostal churches persist as working class strongholds, especially among Afro-Caribbean communities (e.g. Toulis, 1997), evangelical churches seem to appeal predominantly to the middle and upper middle class strata of British society (Martin, 1978: 16; Soper, 1994: 49). Christopher Sinclair notes the examples of Holy Trinity, Brompton and St Helen's, Bishopsgate, both in London, as thriving Anglican parishes with members drawn mainly from the upper-middle or business class (Sinclair, 1993: 171). David Martin has noted a similar constituency among the House Churches, which offer an "expressive tactile faith" to business people and professionals (Martin, 2002: 46). David Bebbington claims that the highest Sunday attendance at any British church in 1991 was recorded as 3, 500 at Kensington Temple, the Elim Pentecostal Church in that prosperous area of London (Bebbington, 1994: 378). And Stephen Briers, in his study of a Restorationist church in Cambridge, finds a mainly middle class congregation in which "the caring and teaching professions are strongly represented." (Briers, 1993: 22)

Briers also notes a high proportion of young people in their late teens and early twenties, noting that about a quarter of the congregation are students. Peter Brierley's most recent church census suggests that 50% of Restorationist church attenders are under 30 (Brierley, 2000: 120). And Leslie Francis (1998) claims that nearly half of those aged 14-21 who are in contact with the Anglican church are in evangelical churches. While the church as a whole boasts a disproportionately elderly population (Brierley, 2000: 93f.), many evangelical churches follow a different trend, appealing to the young, educated and upwardly mobile. Charismatic evangelicals have been the only branch of churchmanship to retain an average member age in the 30s during the 1990s (Brierley, 2000: 121).

Finally, in direct contrast to the American situation, UK evangelicalism appears to thrive best in urban, built-up, and often wealthy, areas. Referring to national statistics, Peter Brierley has revealed that the only regions that experienced evangelical growth in between 1989 and 1998 were Greater London, the South East and the West Midlands (Brierley, 2000: 65). Although the latter may be partially explained with reference to working class, black Pentecostal churches (Toulis, 1997), the former, more populace areas are more prosperous and are home to numerous white dominated middle class parishes. Not only do evangelicals appear to be concentrated in urban areas, they also appear to thrive best within these areas in the British context.

The emerging picture is at a striking variance with Hunter's portrait of the American situation. The British movement has developed into a haven for relatively young, educated, middle class or professional individuals, many of whom live within built up urban or suburban areas of England, some typified by considerable wealth. As such, evangelicalism has paradoxically taken hold among the very social group that Berger sees as a vehicle for secularisation, "the principal "carrier" of progressive, Enlightened beliefs and values" (Berger, 1999: 10).

This may be explained with reference to a number of factors, not least the general and long-standing alienation of the working classes from the English churches (Martin, 1967) and the consequent associations of class prejudice, especially within the Church of England. Medhurst and Moyser have characterised the Church of England as a "predominantly middle class institution largely run by middle class segments of British society" (Medhurst and Moyser, 1988: 170). It embodies a set of interests and a cultural style that resonates more with the middle classes, especially the elderly,

retaining a deference to tradition, national identity and, arguably, political Conservatism (Bruce, 2002: 234). But in addition to this, evangelicalism in particular appears to have expanded into the broader culture during the post-war years *via* distinctively middle class networks. Most crucial have been the effective evangelical presence in the universities and the upper and middle class backgrounds of prominent evangelical preachers. Influential evangelists like David Watson and John Stott have typified the upper class, Oxbridge educated English officer – morally upright, intellectually reflective and embodying a quintessentially ‘British’ social conservatism. Their social identities have inevitably shaped their presentation of the Gospel from the pulpit, inevitably attracting those from similar social circles. More recent high fliers, like Nicky Gumbel – another Oxbridge graduate and former barrister - also embody middle class qualities, while advancing a more genteel, tactile approach.

The Significance of Social Class

But what difference does it make that UK evangelicalism has a largely middle class constituency? There is an argument that the differentiation, fragmentation and pluralism of late modernity have engendered a situation in which identities are constructed with little reference to traditional restraints such as social class and gender (e.g. Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). This stratified model of society has given way to one in which individuals reflexively construct their identities, a process focussed on looks, images and consumer choices (Kellner, 1992). However, there are reasons to be sceptical of such claims. Recent empirical studies have found a persistent correlation between social structures of class and gender and the life choices available to individuals (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992). Moreover,

the observation that UK evangelicalism has a *persistently* middle class constituency suggests a significant bias in affinities and allegiances that is deserved of attention. The above summary of the movement highlights a shift towards a liberalised morality, a broadened conception of church and tradition, and an ambiguous turn inward, all of which are at least partially driven by factors of social class identity. In particular, they resonate with the concerns of what Peter Berger has called the “gentle revolution”, focussed on subjective needs, keen on inter-personal tolerance and expectant of relationships characterised by care and sentiment (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974: 173). But in addition to these general patterns, we might draw attention to three other important consequences of middle class identity for the evangelical subculture, consequences that have a particular bearing upon congregational life.

First, there is the influence of prosperity, and the consequences of material comfort, especially if these follow a pattern that is replicated throughout congregations. If evangelical congregants share a state of comparative financial comfort, they are less likely to challenge broader economic inequalities as they are not faced with divergent states of poverty within their own number. This is not to suggest that social outreach takes a backseat, but that teaching and shared ideologies are unlikely to incorporate leftist economic leanings. Interesting exceptions might rely on vociferous left-wing preachers or intellectual enclaves, though both have a propensity to be marginalised because of the generally apolitical orientation of the UK movement.

Second, evangelicalism has arguably become conflated with certain conventions associated with middle class culture. Stephen Tipton picks out “...social status, material comfort and stability, respectable work, emotional security...” (Tipton, 1982:

231). We might add an avoidance of political extremes, a focus on the nuclear family and a predilection for the quasi-intellectualist consumer choices which are associated with the university set (Radio 4 and *The Guardian*, rather than Channel 5 and *The Mirror*). Of course, these will depend upon local and in-group variations, but certain consistencies are significant in so far as they have become conflated with perceptions of what it means to be a churchgoer or Christian in British culture. Dave Tomlinson points out the common conflation of middle class convention and Christian values among British churches, highlighting the normative nature of the traditional nuclear family and the confusion of holiness with respectability as key examples (Tomlinson, 1995: 34-44). A similar tendency may be found in the *Alpha* course (see above). The key point here, then, relates to how class culture becomes ‘culture religion’ (Walter, 1979) – how social convention seeps into understandings of Christian virtue, effectively excluding those who fall outside of this class boundary. According to this argument, evangelical churches with a predominantly middle class congregation are likely to remain so.

Third, middle class status often incorporates a higher education, and thus a certain level of learning and body of cultural capital. This has significant consequences in terms of literature and the resources one is disposed and empowered to turn to for spiritual guidance and reliable knowledge. Educated, middle class evangelicals may enjoy a level of learning on a par with their clergyman or pastor, especially if they have opted to further their faith by taking a theological course at Bible college. They will probably immerse themselves in enthusiastic, and not uncritical, reading of theological texts and relate their learning to their faith life. Consequently, one can expect to find a peculiar kind of shared discourse in these congregations, possibly

intellectualist and theologically fluent. One might also find a different kind of dependency relationship between clergy and parishioners within middle class evangelical congregations than among working class or mixed groups. Possessing the cultural capital with which to challenge and debate key ideas and beliefs, it is all the more interesting when evangelicals choose not to do this.

SUMMARY

Evangelicalism within the UK has shifted significantly since the 1960s. Movements towards ecumenism, of conflating social outreach with evangelism, and in its embrace of the arts have broadened the boundaries of the tradition. The charismatic movement has also developed the embrace of subjectivity as a site of significance, though not without significant changes in recent years. Sociologists suggest that this combination will engender an inevitable liberalisation of values (Hunter, 1987) and a turn to the self that undermines the authority of tradition (Heelas, 1996a). There are indications that this has occurred, though patterns of accommodation are selective and differ over time and between factional groupings. Part of evangelicalism's expansion into a broader remit appears to have brought about an absorption of a largely middle class membership, particularly through connections with the universities. It was argued that this carries significant implications for the ongoing construction of congregational cultures, particularly in relation to prosperity, cultural convention and education.

CHAPTER THREE

ST MICHAEL-LE-BELFREY, YORK: HISTORY, GROWTH AND CHANGE

Now that I have offered a portrait of the evangelical movement as it exists in the UK, it is necessary to examine the specific details of the case study. I shall provide a general history of the church, offering insights into local developments of national trends, before analysing recent patterns of growth and decline. This will be followed by a description of the demographic make-up of the congregation. The aim of this section is to show how St Michael's is situated in the broader trends described in the previous chapter, and to offer the necessary background to the analysis in subsequent chapters.

Introduction

St Michael-le-Belfrey is an Anglican church that has enjoyed a reputation as a vanguard of charismatic evangelicalism since the 1960s. Its imposing Gothic structure was constructed in the 16th Century and it joins many other churches in the area in attracting significant historical interest. But it is for its most recent history that St Michael's is most famous, establishing for itself the reputation of being a 'showcase' for revival during the 1960s and 70s. It has been the site not only of church growth, but of innovation in evangelism, creative worship and charismatic renewal. It has often been noted to both capture the evangelical climate of the time and also prefigure it through its status as an inspiration for evangelicals nation-wide. In this sense it stands as a most interesting case study, as it embraces all of the main currents of change in the contemporary evangelical world, including small group fellowship, the *Alpha* course, charismatic spirituality and 'alternative' worship.

Context

York is one of the major historical centres of the north of England. While its population is relatively small for a major city (177, 838 in 1999), its importance as a centre of English history and ecclesiastical government is secure. Flanked by residential areas, the city centre is largely populated with shops and small businesses (only 1.9% of the population actually live within the city walls). Although the town is situated in the north of England, it has experienced significant gentrification in recent years, with some newcomers even commuting to London during the week. This has pushed housing prices up and accentuated the ‘privileged’ character of the city and its surrounding areas.

Although not significantly industrialised, the area is home to several successful confectionery and transport businesses. However, the chief industry of the city is tourism, with over four million people per year visiting York from all over the world. Consequently, local residents are used to interacting with strangers to the city. This long-standing trend has also brought many a visitor to St Michael’s over the years and has certainly helped to spread its reputation as a thriving church among wandering evangelicals. Equally important has been the local university, which was established in 1963 and currently has over 8,000 students. Situated just outside of the city, it provides a constant influx of young people. Its Christian Union describes itself as an “evangelical organisation”, adopts the UCCF doctrinal statement and maintains strong links with several local evangelical churches. The most popular with students is St Michael-le-Belfrey.

Ever since Pope Gregory sent Augustine to bring order to the English Church, York has been the chief Christian centre of the north. It serves as the administrative centre of the northern province of the Church of England, with the Archbishop of York lodged in nearby Bishopthorpe. A key source of interest to tourists as well as Christian pilgrims is the Minster, the largest Gothic cathedral in Northern Europe. St Michael's is situated directly adjacent to it, officially remaining the Minster's parish church.

Robin Gill conducted a case study analysis of churchgoing in York in his *Myth of the Empty Church*, published in 1993. He counted twenty-three Anglican churches (excluding the Minster), seven Roman Catholic churches and twenty-three Free Church chapels: twelve Methodist, two Baptist, two United Reformed, one Pentecostal church and six further independent chapels or house churches (Gill, 1993: 248, 256-7, 259, 265). York has also been a historical centre for Quakerism: Gill finds two meeting houses situated in the city and a third on the edge of York (Gill, 1993: 256). He counts eleven Anglican churches in the city itself. According to diocesan records, this number has not changed since, although two churches have become amalgamated with other parishes. But York has more church buildings than active parishes, and several redundant churches are now used as markets and cafés, including the Spurriergate Centre, partially staffed by St Michael's members.

While York boasts a thriving university and café culture, it does not have a very significant 'New Age' presence. A few 'alternative' shops are scattered around the city centre, but the general culture of the city is more traditionalist. Predominantly white, middle class and British (apart from the tourists), there is also only a limited

presence of non-Christian religions. While York does have two Mosques, the nearest Hindu Mandir, Jewish Synagogue and Sikh Gurdwara are all 25 miles away in Leeds.

As noted earlier, the St Michael's parish is situated at the very centre of the city, and includes the Minster itself. At the time of the 1991 census, there were 482 people living in the parish. It is a relatively expensive area, largely dominated by the white middle classes, retail entrepreneurs and Minster clerics. According to the census, only 1.9% of its population are from ethnic minorities, a pattern that is actually replicated at the diocesan level. There is an even smaller proportion of single parent families: 3.93% in the diocese but only 0.4% within the parish. The location of the church also means that many of its members live at quite a distance from the church building.

St Michael-le-Belfrey: Past and Present, Growth and Change

The life of St Michael's is expressed by its long term members as a narrative – a story of revival and growth. It is a story that is usually traced back to 1965, when Revd David Watson arrived as curate at St Cuthbert's, a church being considered for redundancy by the diocesan authorities. Watson was a Cambridge graduate who had been converted whilst a student by Revd John Collins and mentored by the famous David Sheppard. He had served his first curacy under Collins at St Marks' Gillingham, where charismatic renewal had broken out in the early sixties. Upon arriving in York, Watson introduced his vision of living faith into St Cuthbert's, laying the foundations of “regular, believing prayer, faithful preaching of the gospel and trust in the Holy Spirit” (Gledhill, 1996). Being a charismatic, Watson also emphasised the importance of being regularly filled with the Holy Spirit. Although accounts of Watson's impact are ridden with hyperbole, they are largely borne out by

the available statistics. In 1963, the service register of St Cuthbert's church recorded a weekly average of just seven communicants. By 1969, a local newspaper reported an evening attendance of 350 (a fifty-fold increase), filling St Cuthbert's and the annexe in St Anthony's Hall next door (Gill, 1993: 243). Watson had turned a dying church into a thriving evangelical stronghold, and all within the space of a few years.

This period was marked not only by exponential growth, but also by an increase in community involvement. Watson initiated several innovations in church organisation and practice that were designed to include as many different factions of the congregation as possible. Prayer meetings, missions, guest services, creative worship using drama and the arts, banner making and the publication of a church magazine, not only provided legitimating roles for many of the St Cuthbert's congregation, but also served as channels through which the Gospel message could be actively lived out and seen to be alive in socially visible forms.

Furthermore, Watson's ministry at St Cuthbert's included a strong social ethic of community, expressed in mutual support – financial, material, pastoral and familial – amongst the congregation. Financial giving, before negligible, became substantial and consistent. David Watson established the October Harvest festival as a special time for Christian giving. Before his arrival, in 1963, the average contribution per communicant at the festival was 11 shillings. By 1966, a year after his arrival, this had risen to 7 pounds, 18 shillings and 5 pence, a tenfold increase. Levels of giving continued to rise. In between 1966 and 1970, the Easter collection increased fivefold, from just over £26 to £130. David Watson's ministry led people to make greater financial sacrifices in the name of Christian charity, signalling high levels of

community commitment. Cohesion was also fostered through the Thursday evening prayer group, an informal weekly Bible study held in the rectory, which strengthened in-group bonds and attracted further participants from other local churches (Saunders and Sansom, 1992: 102-6).

The growth of the St Cuthbert's congregation continued into the 1970s, as more local residents were drawn to its popular family service and prayer meetings. In 1973, the congregation moved wholesale to St Michael-le-Belfrey, another church set for redundancy which had a capacity of seven hundred. Situated in the centre of York city, Watson perceived the evangelistic potential of the church and eagerly took up his curacy there, taking the existing St Cuthbert's congregation with him. In their first week, the number of communicants increased by 243 and the previous week's collection was multiplied seventy-five times over. Attendances also continued to increase. In 1974, the number of Easter communicants stood at 395, compared with a national average of 98 (Brierley and Wraight, 1995: 244). By 1976, Easter communicants were at 806, and the collection reached £1, 225. The church was moving from strength to strength, expanding numerically and establishing itself as a centre of innovation in worship, Christian drama and evangelism.

In 1982, David Watson left York to focus full-time on his already burgeoning global ministry. He had become an international statesman for renewal through his numerous publications and highly popular university missions. While responsible for turning St Cuthbert's and St Michael's from flagging into thriving churches, Watson had also set St Michael's within the branches of evangelical legend. Boasting connections with St Mark's Gillingham and the origins of charismatic renewal, with John Collins, David

Sheppard and later John Wimber, David Watson had moved among the movement's elite. His influence was far-flung and his reputation as an evangelist preceded him. Moreover, his church had achieved a status comparable to his own, and many are still prompted to join St Michael's upon being inspired by his writing or reputation. In 1984, he tragically died of cancer. Thousands mourned within York and around the world, his passing if anything further securing his status as one of the 'great men' of late twentieth century evangelicalism.

Watson handed over the role of vicar to Revd Graham Cray, an established elder in the church with a special interest in relating the Gospel to contemporary culture. Whereas both claimed to be charismatic evangelicals, while Watson was an evangelist, Cray was an intellectual. His sermons were academic and involved, intellectually stimulating for some, but equally alienating for others. They also adopted different models of leadership. Watson was seen as a spiritual father, a beloved and respected figure who was relied upon for firm theological direction. Cray was a more consensual leader, willing to act as the guiding force behind a myriad of differing viewpoints. He expanded the church eldership and delegated different areas of church life - from youth work to evangelism, pastoral counselling to social responsibility - to individual department heads.

Cray's incumbency also saw an emphasis on the social action of the church within the wider community, and on creative evangelism. He re-established links with other city churches and initiated missionary projects aimed at the reinvigoration of struggling rural parishes in the broader diocese. St Michael's continued to grow during this time, reaching its peak around 1980, when Easter communicants hovered around the 850-

900 mark. Throughout the 1980s, these figures would show a steady but fluctuating decline, reaching 553 in 1989. However, church attendances consistently remained well above the national average (see figure three).

It was during this time, in the late 1980s, that the ‘Warehouse Community’ – later to become *Visions* – first emerged. They were heavily inspired by theories of cultural change and were keen to explore how ideas of the ‘post-modern’ might apply to church. In this respect it was Graham Cray who was their key influence, as it was he who incorporated ideas of post-modernity into sermons and home group teaching. Cray was instrumental in encouraging the group to initiate its worship project, and allowed members to relinquish their commitments to St Michael’s in order that their vision be fully realised. They established themselves as an ‘alternative’ service – officially the ‘fourth service’ of St Michael-le-Belfrey - although they remained a separate initiative in most respects. (See chapter six for a full account of the origins and development of the *Visions* group).

Following Graham Cray’s eventual departure, Revd David White was appointed vicar of St Michael-le-Belfrey in September 1993. White’s approach to ministry was, in many respects, of an opposite style to his predecessor. He emphasised a directive authority as church leader and favoured a conservative theology, expressed in a confrontational style of preaching. He introduced the *Alpha* course to St Michael’s and strongly encouraged all members of the congregation to attend a full course. Indeed, he realigned the church home group structure and incorporated *Alpha* as a new starting point for each group. Soon into his incumbency, David White welcomed the communal experience of the Toronto blessing into St Michael’s services. Influenced

by John Wimber, he expressed a faith in visionary experiences and was keen to express his supernaturalist theology from the pulpit. Perhaps not surprisingly, the congregation were divided in their reactions to this, some embracing the 'blessing' as a continuation of charismatic renewal, others remaining suspicious of a phenomenon they saw as contrived or hysterical.

David White's incumbency proved to be a difficult time for many people in the St Michael's community. The new vicar did not share David Watson's enthusiasm for a ministry to children, and tended to concentrate his efforts on very specific areas of church life, predominantly charismatic worship and in-depth Bible teaching. Some parishioners felt alienated by the Toronto manifestations. Others took exception to the vicar's conservative views on women's leadership or homosexuality, views that he made quite public, occasionally delivering sermons which left the congregation divided. (Graham Cray, by contrast, had advocated women's leadership to the point of appointing several female curates and lay readers during his incumbency).

On the whole, this period is viewed by parishioners with significant ambivalence. Some, who shared David White's theological vision, rally to his support, others look back to what they see as a time of division and decline. Although some congregants claimed that many left the church during this time, a mass departure is difficult to detect in the available figures. The electoral roll shows a depletion of 69 names over two years from 1994, but Easter figures suggest an increase of 64 communicants for the same period. It is possible that visiting worshippers increased while committed members declined.

Whatever the actual numbers, a sense of mass departure and widespread disappointment is enshrined in the folklore of the congregation. Indeed, the fact that the church was experiencing an unprecedented decline was treated by some as an ironic joke. As one parishioner put it, “it got to be a joke at the 9.15 service, at coffee you know: ‘haven’t seen so and so for a couple of weeks, have they left the church?’ It was usually, yes, they *have* left the church.”. Moreover, according to some insider accounts, many of those who left were centrally involved in the church leadership structure, suggesting that conflicts between vicar and congregation were at least in part to do with issues of authority.

David White left St Michael’s in 1999. He was replaced some months later by Revd Roger Simpson. Converted by John Stott as a young student, Simpson received his clerical training at St John’s College, Nottingham and served his curacy with Stott at All Soul’s, Langham Place. He went on to lead a now thriving church in Edinburgh, before moving to Vancouver as a parish vicar with the additional responsibility of overseeing the introduction of the *Alpha* course to Canada.

The appointment of Roger Simpson can be interpreted as an attempt to re-establish St Michael’s on a trajectory, combining elements of its thriving ministry under David Watson and Graham Cray twenty years earlier. Simpson embodies the inclusive ecclesiology of Graham Cray – celebrating diversity in worship and devotional practice – together with a thirst for evangelism and outreach. On those issues that have forced division in the past – notably charismatic gifts and women’s leadership – he is significantly inclusive, supporting a diversity in charisma and the sharing of authority. Indeed, if there is one value that has characterised Roger Simpson’s ministry so far at

St Michael's, it is his emphasis on the unity of the church. Immediate innovations have been the introduction of a mid-week service and of a monthly prayer meeting which the whole church is strongly encouraged to attend. In 2002, a new female curate was appointed to the church staff.

Although sensitive to the intellectual and cultural complexities of Christian life, Simpson nonetheless preaches an evangelical message characterised by simplicity and passion. He is first and foremost an evangelist, and accordingly his sermons are shot through with the ongoing theme of repentance and a turning to Christ. His teaching draws heavily from Biblical texts, but is also illustrated with anecdotal evidence, for the most part based on his own Christian life. Such an approach gives a sense of humanity to his sermons, and his affable demeanour and keen sense of humour follows him to the pulpit.

Reactions to Roger Simpson by the congregation appear to have been generally positive thus far. Many have commented on his affable personality and his concern to foster unity in the congregation. In many respects he is seen as a remedy for past divisions. As one long-term parishioner put it, "Roger is seen as, and is, working to pull things back together again."

St Michael's has been a centre of charismatic evangelical renewal for the past 30 years. Embracing a conservative theology and expressive worship, it has enjoyed exponential growth – peaking in the early 1980s – which has kept attendance figures consistently over six times the national average. As a congregation, it has embraced a commitment to fostering community, expressed in home and prayer groups, and a

strong sense of mutual support. It has also affirmed its commitment to social action through substantial financial giving. It has experienced a varied series of leaders: a classical charismatic evangelicalism with Watson, a more liberal, social agenda with Cray, a more fundamentalistic, supernaturalist theology in White, and a return to diversity and evangelical inclusivism with Roger Simpson. All four considered themselves to be charismatic evangelicals, and yet adopted very different approaches to leadership.

Growth and Decline

The changing fortunes of the St Michael's congregation are represented in figure one. Levels of participation are gauged according to four different sources. (1) *The church electoral roll* lists 'members' of the church, defined as those either living within the parish or who have been attending for six months or more. As it is incumbent upon individuals to sign up to the electoral roll, and as so few attendees actually live within the parish, this is a potentially reliable record of committed members. (2) *The diocesan count* is taken every year on the basis of a show of hands, averaged out from three Sundays in October. It counts those who consider St Michael's to be their 'home' church who are over 18, and serves as the gauge for diocesan contributions paid by individual churches. It has the disadvantage of potentially omitting students studying away from home as well as those who also attend another church. (3) *The service register* is the record of communicants at the Eucharist, noted down by the presiding clergyman at each service. For this study, I have taken an average from October of each year. And (4) *the church address list* records all of those who are on church records and who also fill in and return 'welcome cards' at services. This

understandably records higher numbers than the other sources as it does not count attendance or rely on any ongoing commitment to the church.

As figure three demonstrates, these resources reveal rather different impressions of the situation. They also cover different periods, due to a lack of availability across the entire time period, and are therefore not always comparable. The different resources also vary in their reliability, and it is necessary to say that within this analysis, the service register and electoral roll are taken as most reliable. (The shift to black along the red diocesan count line indicates where there were missing values in the sources. Here, I have assumed a steady line of correlation).

The graph reveals the extent to which levels of church involvement at St Michael's have consistently outpaced national trends (provided here as the average number of Easter communicants). If I were to take the St Michael's Easter figures, the gaps are equally striking: four times the national average in 1975; over eight times the national average by 1980. While St Michael's attendances have showed a steady drop since the early 1990s, the gap is still just as wide: in 1995, for example, the national average stood at 89; St Michael's, by stark contrast, drew in 752 worshippers at Easter, and had an address list of members running to 712 names

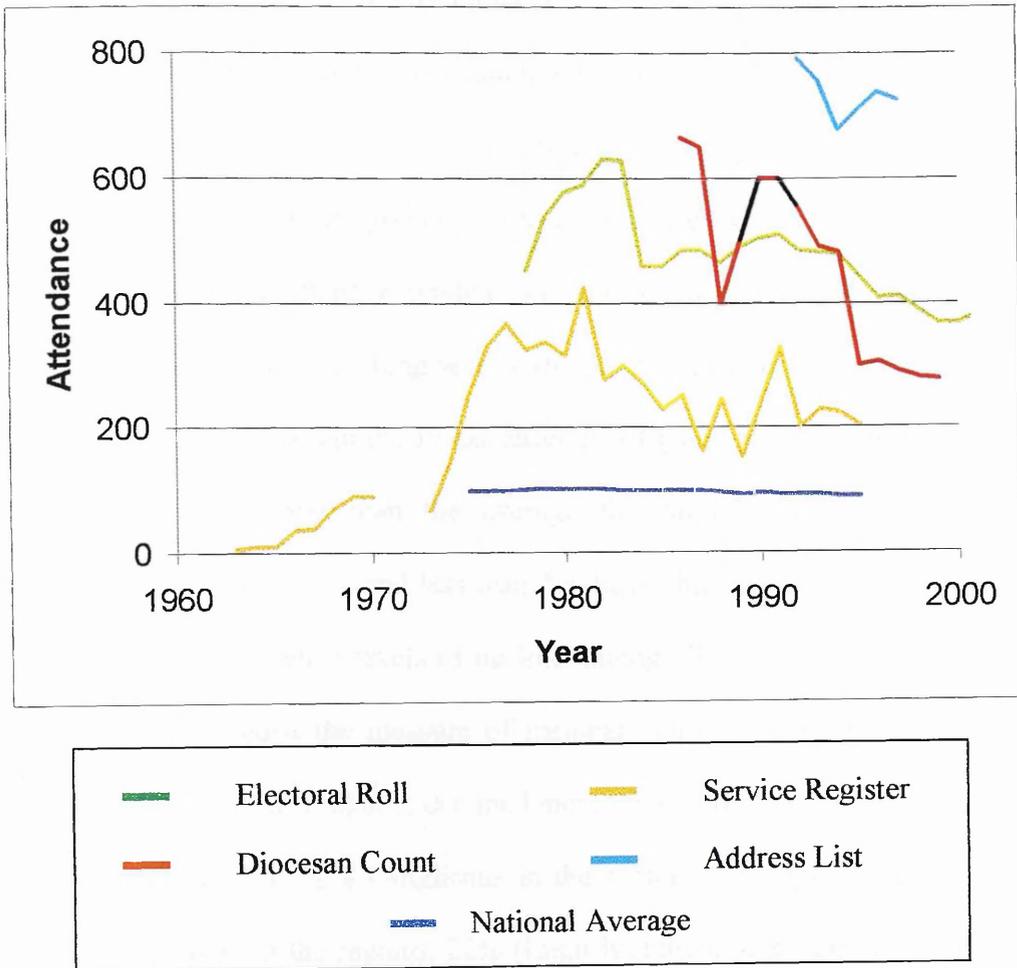


Figure Three: Levels of Involvement at St Michael-le-Belfrey, by Multiple Sources

St Michael's has also consistently outpaced its immediate neighbours. Peter Brierley claims that Yorkshire/Humberside contained one of the lowest proportions of growing churches in the late 1980s (21%) (Brierley, 1991a: 153) and that during the 1990s, there was almost as much decline among evangelicals as non-evangelicals, "the only region for which this is so." (Brierley, 2000: 65) In 1989, of the eleven Anglican churches in the city, the second most well attended was still less than half as populace as St Michael's (Gill, 1993) and there is little reason to suggest that the situation has changed drastically since. In 1993, Robin Gill noted the mean attendance at Anglican churches in York as 142; meanwhile St Michael's was drawing in as many as 357 (Gill, 1993: 263).

But while attendance at St Michael's has towered above national and local averages, there has also been significant fluctuation during the period in question. According to the available data, David Watson's incumbency saw exponential growth in the late sixties and early seventies, giving way to a more uneven trend around 1980. But St Michael's has experienced a gradual and uneven decline since then. Taking the average attendance at its evening service (by far the most popular), levels fell by 16% in the 1980s and by 38% in the 1990s. Brierley's figures suggest that, in the 1980s, St Michael's declined less than the average for Anglican churches in its region (Yorks/Humberside; -26%) and less than Anglican churches in England as a whole (-24%). It directly matched levels of decline among all churches in its region (-16%) and actually exceeded the measure of national church decline (-13%). During the 1990s, St Michael's attendances declined more than all of these comparable variables, by 38% compared to 22% (Anglicans in the region), 23% (Anglicans in England), 33% (churchgoers in the region), 22% (English churchgoers). Decline also exceeded levels of attrition among evangelicals in the region (-29%) and among evangelicals in England (-3%) (Brierley, 2000: 56, 62, 65).

Figure three depicts David White's incumbency (1993-) as one of steady decline – of 24% by the electoral roll. (Decline *was* steady: the deceptively sharp drop in the diocesan count in 1995 is down to the initiation of a more accurate system of counting by the church administration). Thus, while there has been an overall decline in between David Watson's departure in 1982 and 2001 - 39% according to the electoral roll – there have been shifts of rise and fall during this time. But the period since 1993 has been one of unrelenting decline. Moreover, this has outpaced average rates of decline among evangelical and non-evangelical Anglican churches in the area.

Consequently, its decline is accountable by factors specific to St Michael's, and not its environment.

While proportionate decline is unquestionable, St Michael's had achieved such high levels of participation by the 1970s that numbers still outshine its ecclesiastical neighbours by a long way. Working from 1998 figures, Peter Brierley claims that only 11% of UK churches have a regular congregation of over 301 (Brierley, 2000: 47). Although Brierley also claims that evangelical churches have, on average, the largest congregations, this average amounts to a weekly attendance of only 97 (Brierley, 2000: 53). Therefore, St Michael's is not only thriving by national standards, but also by the standards of the evangelical community at large.

Explaining Growth and Decline

Internal explanations of the meteoric rise of St Michael's inevitably focus on the charisma and magnanimous Christianity of David Watson, and subsequent success has undoubtedly built on his innovations in worship, evangelism and small group fellowship. His biographers make an important point in highlighting factors of accessibility, informality and relational care. Watson's key early innovation was the family service, including a short, simple sermon using visual aids, which was intended as relevant for all ages (Saunders and Sansom, 1992: 102-6). To this day St Michael's refuses to have a Sunday school, for fear of excluding children – the future of the church – from the fellowship. This policy seems to have worked: a 1998 survey of evangelical churches revealed that Sunday schools had, on average, 30 children (Brierley, 2000: 169); by contrast, St Michael's has no less than 225 individuals on its youth and children's prayer list.

Of course, this is not the same thing as claiming that St Michael's has contributed to church growth as a whole. Anecdotal evidence suggests that much early growth was through transfer, drawing criticisms of 'poaching' from church leaders and in the local press (Gill, 1993: 243). Gill considers the alternative possibility that it has been high attendances at St Michael's which have ensured that "the overall Anglican churchgoing rate in York declined so little between 1969 and 1989". Figures show a slight decline from 3.5% to 3.4% of the population, contrasted with a national slide of 3.5% to 2.4%. However, this assumes that the entire St Michael's congregation resides within the city boundaries, whereas many members actually travel from further afield (see below). It also assumes that members would not have otherwise gone to church (Gill, 1993: 244). The picture is inconclusive, and recent trends such as cross-attendance, mid-week rather than Sunday attendance and the high mobility of middle class attendees further complicate the issue. A consideration of why St Michael's has grown and declined in the way it has will be offered in chapter eight, in light of the subsequent analysis of congregational culture.

The Demographic Make-up of the Congregation

Sources

The following demographic data has been drawn from two main sources. First, an analysis of the church address list generated data on the gender, age and occupational distribution of the congregation (see appendix B). Second, after my initial period of fieldwork, I administered a detailed questionnaire to a representative sample of the congregation. In addition to addressing attitudes and beliefs, the questionnaire also asked respondents for basic demographic information, including factors of education, occupation and location of residence in relation to the church. (See appendix B for a

full account of how the questionnaire was administered and how the address list data provided a basis for the stratified random sampling method used.) The two data sets are here treated as complementary, and I did not encounter any suggestion during my fieldwork that the profile described below might be significantly inaccurate or mistaken.

Gender

The gender divide in St Michael's is 60% female, 40% male. This reflects national trends, latest figures suggesting that women make up in between 61 and 65% of the English churches (Churches Information for Mission, 2001: 9; Wraight, 2001: 21). According to the church address list, 19% of these women are above retirement age and 26% are students. Of those women of a working age who are not in education, only 16% are housewives. 6% are unemployed, with the remainder (78%) working in various white collar jobs and service occupations, with a few professionals. 13% are teachers. This suggests that expectations of gender roles may not fit the traditional evangelical model of the female domestic homemaker (Griffith, 1997: 45).

Age

National figures suggest that many churches have an ageing population, with the elderly often outnumbering the young. In 1998, 25% of all churchgoers were over 65 while 9% were in their 20s. The figures were 21% and 10% for the evangelical churches (Brierley, 2000: 93). This trend is turned on its head at St Michael's: around 38% of its members are in their 20s and 16% are over 60. The distribution across the middle age brackets is fairly even: 16% in their 30s, 16% in their 40s, and 13% in

their 50s. The majority of the congregation are young and active, with only 16% retired from work.

Occupation

Because of its high percentage of students, only 52% of the congregation are employed. Of these, just over 5% are professionals, mainly doctors, accountants and university lecturers. 8% are employed in manual work, chiefly skilled occupations such as plumbing or farming. The remaining 39% virtually all work in the service professions, either as managers, administrators or in the public sector. Many are nurses, teachers, civil servants or work in computing. 3% of the congregation are unemployed. 16% are retired.

Ethnicity

In terms of its ethnic make-up, St Michael's is a predominantly white church. This was so overwhelmingly apparent from my fieldwork that I did not enquire about ethnicity in the questionnaire or through the address list analysis. There were a handful of students from the far east in the congregation, as well as probably two or three of African origin. But the majority – perhaps as much as 99% - are white and British.

Education

By far the largest occupational grouping is that of student, with 29% of the congregation active in higher education. In addition to this, many older members have also passed through the university system. According to the questionnaire survey, 40% of the congregation *already* hold a university degree, compared with around 15%

of the UK's white population (Matheson and Summerfield, 2001: 69). 9% of the congregation also hold post-graduate degrees. If this is added to address list data, then assuming the two data sets are compatible and equally representative of the congregation, we arrive at the striking conclusion that almost 70% of the congregation have either passed through or are currently engaged in higher education. This adds credence to the argument that this is an overwhelmingly middle class church, and has been for some time. It also sheds light on the social networks that many congregants will have moved in.

Also noteworthy are the 24% who have received post-school religious education. This ranges from diplomas at Bible college, Christian counselling courses and several have taken a Church of England Reader's certificate. The crucial point is that most of these are not taken for professional reasons, but as further channels for the strengthening of one's faith life. Parishioners seek enhancement and faith development through scholarly learning and taught classes, a trend that naturally reflects their class status and in turn, the way in which they make sense of their Christian identity.

Christian Background

While recognised as a charismatic evangelical church and for the most part attended with this in mind, St Michael's attracts a fairly broad selection of Christians. Only two in the survey sample claim to have never attended church regularly before. Of the remainder, 33% have an exclusively Anglican background, while the majority – 63% - have attended churches of various denominations during their lifetime. 79% had attended church during their childhood, and 42% claim this was an evangelical

church. 97% have been baptised – 66% as infants, 21% as adults. 9% have been baptised as both. 64% have been confirmed in the Church of England.

Asked how they would describe their Christian identity, 18% say ‘Anglican’, 27% ‘evangelical’ and 37% ‘charismatic evangelical’. The remainder give other responses, or just prefer ‘Christian’. A similar diversity presents itself in relation to conversion experiences: 40% claim they have always been a Christian, 21% report a gradual development into a life of faith, and 39% converted to Christianity after a ‘born again’ experience which marked a radical turning point.

Elective Parochialism

As a function of its location and of the mobility of its members, very few St Michael’s members actually live near to the church building. In the year 2000, there were 365 people on the church electoral roll, but only 6 of them lived within the parish boundaries. The questionnaire data suggests that only 21% of the congregation live in the city centre, with nearly 18% living more than 5 miles away. One of the clergy claimed that congregants travel from within a 20 mile radius of the church building, and the address list reflects this, listing residents of Malton, Selby and Harrogate. Furthermore, geographical dispersion is matched by a high turnover. Over 10% of the congregation have been regularly attending for less than twelve months, and another 24% have attended for less than five years. A partially overlapping 24% have lived locally for less than five years. These features are a consequence of the geographical and class mobility of the congregation. Many are newcomers to the area, whose jobs may also take them on to new locations in the not so distant future. The high proportion of undergraduates carries the same implications and attendance levels

fluctuate with the university terms. In 1998, attendance levels at the evening service dropped by 32% for August but picked up again by mid September.

St Michael's appears to incorporate a high proportion (perhaps 40 or 50% if one includes students) of what some sociologists have called 'elective parochials' (Tipton, 1982; Warner, 1988). One of the consequences of social mobility and perpetual uprootedness is the lack of an enduring place in any community. Elective parochials attempt to re-create the connections and relationships of community life by forging temporary allegiances with local institutions, one option being the church. The most significant consequence of this is the attenuated nature of commitment that such allegiances foster. Many individuals are unable or unwilling to engage in church involvement which makes demands on one's time outside of Sunday worship. This is a visible feature of congregational life and a problem noted by church leaders. While the fostering of Christian community is a shared priority, it is a project that is subject to the limitations that elective parochialism brings. As one member of the St Michael's clergy put it,

"St Michael's is a great place. There is a lot going for it. But, it isn't what you might call a real...church...because we have an eclectic congregation. It comes in, it listens to what it wants to listen [to], it puts into practice what it wants to put into practice, and the rest is thrown out. Because, we don't see one another from week to week. We meet on a Sunday, have a great time, and then we go into our worlds, and we meet again on Sunday. Don't we have community?"

Demographic Profile: Summary

St Michael's has a distinctive demographic profile. Turnover of younger parishioners is quite high because of the significant student population, but the church also retains a large number of long-standing members. The gender divide reflects the national profile and the church boasts a disproportionately high number of young people in their 20s, in contrast to the ageing population of the church in general. The majority of

the congregation are of a middle or upper middle class background, mostly working in non-manual, and often service-oriented, careers. The vast majority have enjoyed a university education. The social mobility of the congregation is borne out by the high turnover of members and by the distances which many travel to attend church. The elective parochialism that this brings inevitably limits the fostering of community relationships among congregational members.

Congregational Life

Given the discrepancies between address list and attendance figures, it is fair to say that St Michael's has a large active body of over 900 people, but a regular Sunday attendance of around 300. One interpretation would equate this division with reference to the elective parochials who show less commitment to church life, though the evidence is inconclusive. The church may be viewed in terms of two overlapping populations: those who are connected to the church in a general sense, including committed members and occasional attendees (altogether and henceforth referred to as *the congregation*), and those who are committed members, attend regularly, are involved in church government and administration and whose membership extends well beyond attendance at Sunday services. Such a distinction between core and periphery is discernible within congregational life, and the variety of church activities at St Michael's allows such fluctuation of commitment to flourish and be recognised. In addition to Sunday services, St Michael's organises home groups, *Alpha* courses, prayer meetings and other social gatherings all on a regular basis. 'Members' of the church measure their Christian devotion and community participation within a broader frame of reference than that offered by the Sunday service.

As far as Sunday services are concerned, St Michael's holds four. Traditional morning worship is at 9am; the family service, including all-age teaching and light-hearted sermons for children is at 11am; and at 7pm is the evening service, a more charismatic celebration which is the most popular of the three. *Visions* hold evening services three Sundays a month in the nearby St Cuthbert's centre. At the time of fieldwork they took three forms: a multi-media communion service on the first Sunday of each month; the prayer installation of the labyrinth on the second; and an upbeat dance service on the third. Communion is held at one of the four services each week, on a rotational basis. Attendance levels for 1999 are given below.

SERVICE	AVERAGE ATTENDANCE, 1999
9.15am	110
Family	180
Evening	275
<i>Visions</i>	20 (estimate)

Table One : Average Attendance at each of the services at St Michael-le-Belfrey, 1999. (source: service register)

In addition to the Sunday events, a Wednesday lunchtime service was introduced in October 1999. According to Peter Brierley, 42% of English churches now hold a midweek service, average attendance being just 21 people (Brierley, 2000: 157). The attendance at the St Michael's midweek service started at double this, around 40, but has shown a steady increase ever since, reaching 58 by February 2000.

SUMMARY

In outlining the history and demographic make-up of St Michael-le-Belfrey, it was demonstrated that this church firmly reflects wider trends in the evangelical movement. As it has grown it has absorbed the movements that engender liberalisation – including creative evangelism - and has embraced an appropriation of

the subjective through charismatic renewal. Moreover, it attracts a predominantly middle class, educated congregation, characterised by some as the “knowledge class” (Wuthnow et al, 1984: 69) and as the vehicle for modern values. This prompts the question: to what extent has a liberalisation and subjectivisation of tradition taken place, and how has this affected the cohesion of the church and the beliefs of congregants? These questions will be addressed in detail in the following two chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR
LIBERALISATION: THE BOUNDARIES OF CONGREGATIONAL
IDENTITY

“...diversity is something that strikes me and thrills me because I am aware that different people find different entry points into the church.” (Roger Simpson)

“St Mike’s is a bit liberal for me...”

When I first interviewed him, James had been attending St Michael’s for several years. Initially only attending to accompany his wife, he had since been employed by the church in a pastoral role, his primary responsibility being the extensive home group network. James is 25, has a university degree in sports science and is trained as a school teacher. He comes from what he describes as a “conservative evangelical” background. As a Christian, he places most emphasis upon the authority of the Bible and measures all other things against this. Correspondingly, he objects to Christians who reject aspects of scripture that do not match cultural convention. He does not believe in infant baptism and is unconcerned with denominational identity, affirming a strong belief in salvation by faith alone as expressed in a mature and considered confession of Christian commitment. James believes that women should not occupy positions of headship in the church or in the household as they are “designed emotionally [and] physically for different roles” and, more importantly, because this is what the scriptures teach. He also claims that moral evil has its origins in the Garden of Eden, and believes in the devil as a fallen angel who functions as a force of evil in today’s world. He is personally uncomfortable with the use of charismatic gifts in church, but puts this down to a matter of individual spiritual style. As he stresses, “I see God through understanding His word.”

James expresses a classically evangelical set of values, a moral and religious

conservatism that we might expect to find in an ‘evangelical’ church. He veers towards a conservative evangelical rather than charismatic evangelical stance, but does not perceive any serious theological divergence between the two. However, I was surprised to discover that James actually considered St Michael’s to be excessively liberal. He sees the congregation as expressing a significant diversity of values, and views this as a problem. He would rather see the church commit to a more narrowly defined theological agenda. He has also been surprised and disappointed with how liberal many of the home group leaders are. In his opinion, they follow their ‘feelings’ rather than the scriptures. He has encouraged the leadership to compose a ‘mission statement’ that church members would be asked to sign up to, but implies that he is fighting a losing battle. He sees himself as a radical on the periphery of the church - not alone, but certainly in the minority. James also sees Roger Simpson’s style of leadership as far too consensual, claiming that he is trying to please everybody. He would prefer a far more uncompromising and directional headship. He even goes as far as to question the ‘evangelical’ identity of the church. “What I see is not evangelical”, he says, referring to what he sees as an insufficiently Biblical approach to the faith. He rather sees St Michael’s as “liberal charismatic”, adding with some humour, that he would “probably get shot for that!”

The Liberalisation Question

James’s comments alerted me to a number of important features of congregational life. In spite of the claims of the new vicar, spiritual diversity is not affirmed as a positive feature by everyone in St Michael’s, and for a significant number it signals a loss of direction. There is a discernible, though not destructive, tension between parishioners who embrace a broad vision of evangelical spirituality, and those who

favour a more defined, less compromising approach. This very much reflects differences of opinion about the styles of former leaders, summarised in the previous chapter. Those of the more ‘narrow’ persuasion lament the loss of David White, while others welcome the more inclusive embrace of diversity advocated by Graham Cray and currently by Roger Simpson.

The adjective ‘evangelical’ is clearly understood in different ways by different members of the congregation. The theological perspectives that James sees as overly “liberal”, and “insufficiently Biblical” to be counted as ‘evangelical’, are embraced by others as core features of an authentically evangelical faith, especially in so far as ‘evangelical’ is taken to mean ‘alive’ and therefore ‘culturally engaged’. From an objective viewpoint, the very diversity signalled by such patterns of usage suggests that the congregation is indeed ‘liberalised’ to a considerable degree. In other words, this lack of agreement on matters of belief and doctrine implies either an erosion in the number of congregants prepared to conform to an authoritative body of ideas, or else the general absence of an authoritative body of ideas altogether. Either way, James’s comments are indicative of the broadening, ‘softening’ and diversifying of the evangelical belief system that Hunter (1987) associates with a general accommodation to the norms of secular modernity. This chapter attempts to map this process more precisely by gauging patterns of belief and degrees of diversity within the St Michael’s congregation.

Measuring Liberalisation

‘Liberal’ is a difficult concept, conveying numerous meanings. It has always carried notions of freedom, developed positively as generosity and negatively as lack of

restraint. The political sense emerged from the early 19th century, focussing upon the freedoms of individuals, and in the USA it continues to carry overtones of the progressive or radical, serving as the foil to political and religious conservatives (Williams, 1976: 179-181). Within evangelical rhetoric, it has long been a dirty word, carrying connotations of compromise and capitulation to secular values (Noll, 1994; Tomlinson, 1995). In theology, it stands for a positive engagement with the norms of modern knowledge (Grenz and Olson, 1992: 51-62). Amongst sociologists, uses have been similar, though more neutral, suggesting an effort to engage with and adapt to an often changing culture (Bruce, 1984: 90). As this inevitably involves a broadening in orientation, liberalisation might be defined as a move from a narrow to a more open position. In Hunter's terms, it is to re-draw the boundaries of a social group in a way that leaves them less narrowly circumscribed (Hunter, 1987: 19f.).

In his book on the changing values of American evangelicals (Hunter, 1987), James Davison Hunter finds a relaxation of the boundaries of evangelical religion. He argues for a move away from an understanding of the Bible and evangelical tradition as external, non-negotiable authorities. Instead, evangelicals are becoming more tolerant of non-Christians, less rigid in their readings of the scriptures and more open to possibilities of change within the evangelical worldview.

Hunter's argument is that the boundaries of evangelical tradition are suffering from a gradual erosion in the face of modernity. Moreover, he claims that evangelicalism is incapable of reinforcing these boundaries, for three reasons. First, an 'ethic of civility' has pervaded the evangelical subculture. Originating in the political sphere, there has, over the course of this century, emerged a code of civility that, while acknowledging

radical differences of opinion, also encourages the acceptance of the right of others to hold opinions that diverge from one's own. This has passed into the religious sphere, so that evangelicals are compelled to be not only tolerant of others' beliefs, but also *tolerable to* others. "Anything that hints of moral or religious absolutism and intolerance is underplayed." (Hunter, 1987: 183) In this sense, the open public affirmation of firm boundaries of belief is implicitly discouraged.

Second, a decreasing number of evangelicals actually believe in the sanctity of these boundaries. This is especially the case with respect to scripture, no longer perceived as issuing demands that are objective and binding, but rather as offering guidelines, the meaning of which is generally apprehended as symbolic and subjective. Third, there is no longer any binding consensus on what these boundaries actually are. As Hunter puts it,

"From all indications the pluralism of opinion over theological, moral, familial, and political issues in Evangelicalism (already wide-ranging) is expanding and not coalescing into a new consensus." (Hunter, 1987: 185)

In many respects, Hunter's case echoes H. Richard Niebuhr's famous argument that, as religious groups grow, they experience a transition from sect into denomination, the latter characterised by a greater accommodation to external forces. Niebuhr (1962) isolates three main pressures which drive this process: younger generations become less committed as they inherit rather than choose religious identity; increasing wealth and status makes worldly accommodation more likely; and the necessary development of a more formal leadership and organisational structure "subverts the initial radical impetus" (Bruce, 2002: 24). These pressures may, with some qualification, be mapped onto the development of St Michael-le-Belfrey, charted in chapter three. A moribund church was revitalised by a charismatic leader who attracted many new members. He

introduced a charismatic evangelical model of faith and encouraged strong community ties which may be characterised as sectarian. Teaching was conservative and stressed the boundaries between saved and unsaved. Participation was regular and extended outside Sunday worship and the congregation was close-knit and inter-dependent. Subsequent years have seen a greater influx of middle class members, a high turnover of members and several changes in leadership. St Michael's has increasingly engaged in dialogue with external agencies: ecumenical dialogue, university links, local social aid projects and creative evangelism. The 1980s marked a peak in what members refer to as a great spiritual diversity, a "cord made of many strands": charismatic spirituality, the contemplative tradition, evangelical Biblicism and social justice. The deep-seated entrenchment of this 'liberal' agenda was made apparent through the more conservative reforms of the early 1990s, which provoked dissonance throughout the congregation. Within the present life of the congregation, correlations can be made with developments across the national movement, discussed in chapter two in terms of a broadening of horizons.

Participation in Broader Developments

In chapter two, I argued that the wider evangelical movement in Britain had initiated a process of internal liberalisation through three main developments that began in the 1960s. The first was a broadening of ecclesiology, accompanied by a drive for ecumenism. The second was a return to social action as an evangelical priority, and the conflation of social action with evangelism. The third was the widespread embrace of popular culture and the arts in worship and outreach projects. Their combined effect was a broadening of the cultural spheres with which evangelicals had regular contact, and a consequent expansion of the boundaries of evangelical acceptability.

In many ways St Michael's has been embroiled in these wider changes. All of its clergy have been keen to stress the faith-based notion of salvation which overrides denominational difference. St Michael's has maintained numerous links with other local churches over the years, both Anglican and non-conformist. Indeed, for a period during my fieldwork, the St Michael's mid-week service was held jointly with the local Central Methodist Fellowship. However, connections with other churches have been limited, and St Michael's is seen by some locals as rather insular and pre-occupied with itself. Its comparative success has spawned jealousy and accusations of 'poaching' from other local churches, and this has done little to strengthen relations among respective parishioners.

In terms of its professed outlook, St Michael's is thoroughly ecumenical in so far as it emphasises the unity of Christians through faith and de-emphasises the importance of denominational difference. Many members are unconcerned with the Anglican identity of the church, preferring to focus upon Biblicism and mission rather than traditional survivals superfluous to the evangelical life. In chapter two I described how John Stott has consistently called for a balance of institutional and individual responsibility among evangelicals, in contrast with the US emphasis upon individual responsibilities. There is evidence of this balance in St Michael's, although the 'institution' is most frequently conceived as the St Michael's community, rather than the local area, Anglican communion or broader church.

St Michael's is consistently initiating new social outreach events, both around the local area and further afield. Its vibrant youth work extends into local schools, in which lunchtime meetings are offered. At the time of fieldwork, youth leaders were

busy establishing 'The Vibe', an evening dance music venue designed as a 'safe' place for young people to gather and talk to other Christians. During my time at the church, I was astounded at the number of social aid and justice projects that were supported and publicly promoted. Each week, the church newsletter had more to offer, and sometimes parishioners would address the congregation from the front of the church in a bid for further support. Events were held in support of AIDS sufferers, special collections were made in aid of the victims of recent natural disasters, and on one occasion, the entire church spent time during an evening service writing letters to the Prime Minister as part of the Jubilee 2000 campaign. Although some of these initiatives involved encouraging the conversion of others, they were seldom conceived as important for this reason alone. Indeed, most were promoted as extensions of Christian morality and as valuable in their own right.

As far as embracing the arts, St Michael's has been a pioneering force in the evangelical world since the 1970s. It has spearheaded the use of drama, dance and banner-making as integral aspects of regular worship, and has overseen the emergence of a successful Christian theatre group. There has been a consistent effort to remain at the cutting edge of new worship music, and the congregation have embraced the popular Vineyard tradition since the 1980s (Miller, 1997: 86-7; Percy, 1996). At the current time, music at the evening service is by far the most up-beat and singers are backed by a full rock band, all of whom are amplified and play on stage at the front of church. Although the embrace of art and popular culture is by no means as radical here as it is among the *Visions* group, St Michael's shares with 'new paradigm' churches a desire to be culturally current and engaged in wider social trends (Miller, 1997).

Cultural Relevance

A further comment must be made about the way that the people of St Michael's feel their church deals with the outside world. Questionnaire returns suggest that being 'culturally relevant' is a priority among congregants. 73% of the sample feel that 'thinking through the Gospel message in order to relate it to your own culture and personal situation' is 'very important'. This scored higher than 'caring for the homeless' (42%), 'providing a moral example' (67%) and even 'telling others about Jesus' (69%). The only task ranked more important was reading the Bible (82%).

However, despite its reputation as remaining at the cutting edge of the evangelical movement in terms of innovation and creativity, many members feel that St Michael's falls short of its ideals. During interviews, I asked parishioners whether they thought the church as a whole relates well to culture. Every one of them responded in the negative, claiming that the church could, and should, do a whole lot more in its efforts to be 'culturally relevant'. Only 37% feel that sermons in St Michael's adequately deal with contemporary culture. There is a widespread view that, in order to be a successful church and grow, St Michael's needs to change itself in order to meet the needs of the unchurched. As one parishioner put it,

"...there's a hunger for spirituality out there but the church is not meeting it... and there are more and more people out there, and they're not going to fit into church. We must get to the point where, you know, church has to fit them."

Clearly, Dave Tomlinson's (1995) argument that the church must adapt to its post-modern context would carry some weight among the St Michael's congregation. To be fair, this does not tend to generate a radical theology as 'cultural relevance' is embraced only in so far as it serves the more fundamental aims of evangelism and growth. The effectiveness of cultural dialogue is measured by the degree to which it attracts the unchurched, rather than the degree to which it offers meaning to those

already within the faith, or indeed, those at its margins.

St Michael's parishioners would not go as far as the post-evangelicals, but they generally recognise a need to adopt an orientation to modernity that is one of tempered accommodation and acclimatisation. The medium should change but not the essential message – in Biblical terms, being “in the world, but not of the world”. We might assume from this that, not only is St Michael's demographically predisposed to a liberal evangelical outlook (see chapter two), it also embraces an outlook that encourages a degree of capitulation to the modern worldview that surrounds it.

St Michael's does therefore stand as an exemplar – and in some cases an instigator - of major shifts in the wider evangelical movement. But what bearing do these developments have upon the religious values expressed by individual members of the congregation? What vision of Christianity is shaped and negotiated within it? Hunter's (1987) analysis draws attention to the ways in which this sense of spiritual diversity might be extended into a liberalisation of attitudes, characterised by tolerance, an openness to change and the weakening plausibility of old beliefs. The following section addresses the extent to which this has occurred within the St Michael's congregation, drawing from questionnaire and interview data.

I do this in two stages: first, taking those issues on which the majority of members appear to agree, and which appear to conform to the version of evangelical piety akin to that instilled in the church during the 1960s. An impression of these ‘traditional’ values was gained through conversations with older members in conjunction with an exploration of the work of David Watson. Second, I take those issues which prompt a

diversity of responses or an overall support for a ‘liberal’ position. This way, we are able to detect which areas of belief have been most vulnerable to liberalisation, and which have been more resilient.

Signals of Traditional Piety

Traditionalist perspectives in the congregation tend to centre on purely theological issues, i.e. matters of salvation, its meaning and process, and of Christian authority. If there are any signals of liberalisation, they are not connected to perceptions of God or Christ. Questionnaire responses suggest a strong belief in God as a real and personal presence, whose rule is absolute. 97% agree that there is a God who concerns Himself with every human being personally. 93% believe Jesus to be God in human form. Parishioners also affirm a strong dependency upon God and God’s ordained order for humanity. Faced with the statement, “Life is only meaningful if you provide the meaning yourself”, a resounding 79% reject it outright, while 82% agree that “Life is only meaningful because God exists”. 79% also take the devil to be a personal being (i.e. rather than an impersonal force) in reflection of the dualistic ontology typical of many charismatic churches.

Individuals also clearly conceive of their Christian identities as demanding a radical commitment. 82% say they mostly make a conscious attempt to make important decisions on the basis of their faith.

Consideration of a broader spectrum of data sources suggests two main areas of resilience, apparently impervious to change: the soteriology of substitutionary atonement and the closeness of God, and the centrality of scripture.

Substitutionary Atonement and the Closeness of God

If there is one evangelical motif which stands uncorrupted and intact throughout the St Michael's congregation, it is that of penal substitutionary atonement. The model of salvation through confession of faith in Jesus as the exclusive means of deliverance from inevitable sin, is apparently embraced by all. It pervades sermons and is affirmed without question by individual parishioners. Indeed, it is frequently expressed in a highly articulate and intellectual form. I found that members could provide a detailed and theologically sophisticated account of the salvation process, a reflection of their middle class, educated status. This exposition by Peter, of what 'evangelical' means, is not untypical,

"The word itself obviously is from 'evangel', the Gospel – the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that he is the saviour of mankind, he's the world saviour, and therefore sent by God, as God incarnate, who identified himself with man, took man's sin on him, on the cross, to be punished on behalf of man. That sacrifice was accepted, demonstrated by the resurrection of Christ, and then eventually his ascension into heaven...and that salvation is on the basis of confession of sin, acceptance of Christ's sacrifice for oneself, and then a testifying of the reality of that, by one's words."

This conception of salvation embodies several other key ideas for the evangelical: the radical sinfulness of man, the importance of an open confession of faith, the centrality of a personal decision to follow God. That these ideas are consistently affirmed by the congregation is not surprising. They form the theological cornerstone of evangelicalism, conveying crucicentrism and conversionism while implying Biblical authority (Bebbington, 1989). They were relentlessly taught by David Watson, whose books have been imbibed by those parishioners too young to remember his sermons.

Within St Michael's, Christianity is most frequently described in terms of a relationship, a personal relationship between God and the believer that is possible because of one's commitment. The church distributes 'prayer cards' to encourage the

unconverted, which state:

“If you want to get right with God, the chance is available now. If you want to remove the gap between you and your God then declare Him Lord of your life and invite Him to start a new relationship with you today.”

In so far as this idea of a ‘relationship’ can be traced back to evangelical fathers such as Wesley and Jonathan Edwards - Charles Wesley wrote one hymn entitled “Christ the Friend of Sinners” (Noll, 2001: 263) - it is a traditional retention. However, in the form in which it is expressed in St Michael’s, it owes more to the charismatic movement, and specifically to David Watson’s articulation of it, which is enshrined in local memory as well as in the broader English tradition. The relationship afforded by Christian commitment is inextricably bound up in notions of a living divine presence, embraced as an intimate friend, guide and mentor. As Watson put it, God “knows us and calls us by name. He has a personal love for each one of us.” (Watson, 1981: 35)

The concept of a personal relationship also carries inevitable connotations of individualism, intimacy and an ongoing dialogue between the divine and the human. The significance of these ideas is brought out clearly in available statistical data. Faced with the statement, ‘There is a God who concerns Himself with every human being personally’, 78% of the St Michael’s congregation agree strongly. Another 19% agree, and no one is unsure or disagrees. This is in contrast to the 10% who agree strongly and 19% who agree within the British population as a whole, 22% of whom either disagree or disagree strongly with the statement (Jowell *et al*, 1999: 363). While the general population veers closer to a belief in divinity as some kind of vital spirit or life-force (40% in 1993 - Heelas, 1996: 108-9), the St Michael’s congregation remain firmly within the evangelical camp, affirming their belief in a God who is both personal *and knowable* to all who accept Him.

A sense of loving relationship is often expressed by parishioners as an anti-legalistic sentiment, clearly aimed at perceived misjudgements from secular cynics. Christianity is not seen in terms of an obedience to rules, but as a series of commitments that arise out of a loving relationship with Jesus. Once this is acknowledged, Christian values inevitably proceed from it. As James puts it,

“I’m not a Christian to get a load of stuffy rules forced upon me. I’m a Christian because I’m in a love relationship and I want to serve that person. Similarly, I want to serve Deborah [my wife], because I’m married to her and I love her. I love God and so therefore I want to serve Him.”

This sense of familiarity manifests itself in the common discourse of the congregation. According to one middle aged parishioner, God is, for him, a friend who is always close. Several preachers make a point of stressing the familiar closeness between God and His church by invoking the title ‘Dad’ (rather than the traditional ‘Father’) in referring to the believer’s relationship to the divine. As one preacher put it, God does not only forgive us, He also adopts us into His family, which is why we call Him ‘dad’. He then introduced the Lord’s prayer, here tellingly glossed as the ‘family prayer’.

The perception of Christian faith as bound up in a personal relationship with God extends for many into a belief that church is secondary to individual commitment. For example, the majority of members (73%) see themselves as ‘evangelicals’, ‘charismatic evangelicals’ or just ‘Christians’ rather than as ‘Anglicans’. Denominationalism, although not dismissed in a Restorationist vein (Walker, 1989), is not treated as something fundamental to Christian identity. One’s confession of faith makes you a Christian; one’s choice of church merely reflects a stylistic preference for a particular kind of worship or community experience. However, while institutional differences are not seen as important, immersion in a community of other Christians is

viewed as crucial. As one parishioner comments, “the relationship [with God] is enhanced...by sharing in that relationship with other Christians in the context of church fellowship.” While salvation is seen as accessible outside of the institution of the church, a sound Christian life is viewed as best achieved through fellowship with other evangelicals.

The Centrality of Scripture

Perhaps most clearly, the evangelicals of St Michael’s profess a firm conviction in the authority of the Bible. Scriptures are placed above the church, its leaders and above charismatic experience as the foundation of Christian truth and as the sole guide to Christian living. Alan expresses the common viewpoint in these terms,

“...I do believe that it is the living word of God. I do believe it is God’s revelation to men through men, and I think all other forms of revelation, you know, prophetic or whatever, have to be measured up to what the Bible says...”

Correspondingly, the common benchmark for a valuable piece of advice or for a good sermon is: is it Biblical? Parishioners often explain their movement between different churches in terms of how ‘Biblical’ the teaching had been. Some intersperse Biblical stories and references into conversations to demonstrate the validity of a viewpoint or the significance of a recent incident (see chapters five and seven for further discussion of this trend).

A willingness to submit to the scriptures is also reflected in common practice. The Christian life is conceived as a perpetual learning process and its sourcebook, the Bible. Individuals therefore absorb themselves in the texts in order to both achieve an understanding of moral and religious duty, but also in order to make sense of the world around them. Many parishioners bring along their own Bibles to Sunday

services, especially in the evening service, and some make notes in the margins during the sermon. Home group meetings are based around Bible study, undertaken as a means of developing one's personal faith in fellowship with others. Sunday sermons are conceived as resourcing this process, delivered as expositional analyses of specific Biblical texts. Teaching is always applied to the contemporary everyday life of Christians, but is also frequently grounded in a point by point discussion of a chosen passage (see chapter one).

Regular private Bible reading is also viewed as an important aspect of daily life. When interviewing individuals in their homes, I became accustomed to seeing a copy of a well-used NIV Bible, dog-eared and book-marked, placed ready on the living room coffee table. In Spring 1999, the St Michael's leadership administered an internal survey on Bible reading, which exposed the widespread popularity of this practice. All services were surveyed, including the *Visions* group, and 504 individuals completed a questionnaire on a single Sunday. 39% claimed that they read their Bible daily and a further 38% said they read the Bible a few times a week. Only 6% claimed that they only read their Bible in church, and 5% less frequently. The results also suggested that those who read their Bibles most frequently were evenly distributed across differences of age and preference of Sunday service.

A British MORI Poll in 1993 found that 33% of weekly churchgoers read their Bibles every day (Gill, 1999: 42). As this does not allow for churchmanship, we might expect the evangelicals of St Michael's to produce higher figures. The mere 6% margin may prove one leader's concern – that the results were “disappointing” - well-founded. However, the results are not skewed and a clear 77% read their Bibles at least a few

times a week (comparable figures from MORI are unavailable). For a British Anglican evangelical church, St Michael's exhibits a significant degree of zeal for the scriptures. Indeed, the fact that the leadership conducted this study implies a desire to measure signals of personal piety among the congregation, and an underlying perception of Bible study as pivotal to sound Christian living.

Summary

To summarise, the parishioners of St Michael's express a model of evangelical belief which is faithful to the church's identity in the late 1960s in two major respects. Their soteriology is based on substitutionary atonement and a relational sense of the divine. And they affirm the Bible as the central and overriding authority in all matters. Working with Bebbington's (1989) definition of evangelicalism, these reflect most clearly the conversionist, Biblicist, and crucicentrist aspects of the tradition. These are put into practice through 'activist' projects of social outreach, community building and the application of personal pieties such as Bible reading and prayer. But although the ongoing influence of secularisation and modern change has not eradicated these features, they have not been immune from significant transformations in form, emphasis and discursive expression.

Movements of Accommodation

The Truth Status of the Scriptures

While the Bible is comprehensively affirmed as the primary authority and foundation of the Christian life, congregants are clearly less united in their views about the precise truth status of its texts. This is a complex issue; as the scriptures are read and

invoked in a myriad of contexts, there is room for an equally diverse set of approaches to appropriating the text as a spiritual resource. For an initial impression, one can appeal to questionnaire returns, which reveal a clear diversity of opinion. Respondents were asked which of the following statements best reflects their view of the scriptures.

1. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, not mistaken in its statements and teachings, and is to be taken literally, word for word.
2. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, not mistaken in its teachings, but is not always to be taken literally in its statements concerning matters of science, historical reporting, etc.
3. The Bible becomes the Word of God for a person when he reads it in faith.
4. The Bible is an ancient book of legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men.

Responses are presented in tabular form below, compared with Hunter's results for the US evangelical 'coming generation' and responses to the 1998 British Social Attitudes Survey.

	St Michael's	Hunter's sample	Britain
Bible as literally true	24%	41%	4%
Bible true but not always to be taken literally	51%	52%	34%
Bible true when read in faith	18%	7%	—
Bible as ancient book of fables	0%	0%	44%
This does not apply to me	—	—	8%
No answer	5%	2%	2%

Table Two: Attitudes towards the truth of the Bible in the St Michael's congregation (2000), the US evangelical 'coming generation' (Hunter, 1987: 24) and in Britain (Jowell et al, 1999: 363) (a dash symbol indicates where an option was not offered within that particular survey.)

Biblical literalism has never held comparable support in the UK as it does across the Atlantic, and since the 1960s evangelicalism has steered decidedly away from a stance

with 'fundamentalistic' overtones. However, among churchgoers, there are signals of significant minority support. Citing the British Household Panel Survey, Robin Gill claims that in 1994, 28% of weekly adult churchgoers 'strongly agreed' with a literalist statement (Gill, 1999: 101). Given that this figure does not discriminate by churchmanship, we might expect proportions of evangelical churches to veer above this 28%. Therefore the figure of 24% for St Michael's is especially telling, and signals an overwhelming majority discomfort with the literalist position. Hunter finds the same trend in his US study, but with double the support for the literalist option, unsurprising given the more conservative tone of the American movement, but significant given the generally liberalising attitudes of his sample of college students and seminarians (Hunter, 1987: 24). If St Michael's is set on a similar developmental curve, then it has travelled further towards the liberal end and further away from an exclusivist, 'hard' position.

The interesting question then is, what kind of approach to the scriptures do those uncomfortable with a literalist model favour as an alternative? As the majority support for the second option implies, it is acknowledged that the Bible contains factual and scientific mistakes and is therefore not always to be taken literally on matters of history and science. Such a position would imply a capitulation to the rational scientific worldview, as it is placed above the scriptures with respect to certain issues.

However, those holding to this position do not see a problem with this, as they do not see the scriptures as primarily historical or scientific texts (Hunter, 1987: 25). Rather, they are conceived as taking multiple forms and literary genres, in which are embedded 'essential' religious truths. Moreover, these 'truths' are not conceived as

grounded in factual statements. As Alan put it, “I don’t have hang ups as to whether, you know, did Jonah, or Job really exist... - they may have done, or they may not have done - but I think the deep truth[s] revealed by the accounts of their lives are truly valid...” In sum, truth is embedded in the Biblical narratives, but is not seen as always straightforwardly present in propositional statements.

I discussed with one of the St Michael’s clergy his views on the truth of the scriptures. His response was highly instructive and very much reflected many of the other views I heard amongst the congregation.

“MG: Is the whole of the Bible to be taken as absolutely true?

AM: Yes. Of course, but what is truth? If you want to ask me whether we should take it literally, I think ...that would be impossible, because the Bible is not one book, it’s a library. You’ve got history, you’ve got poetry, you’ve got, you know, songs, you’ve got narratives... you’ve got letters, you’ve got accounts of ...what people have done and so on...I think to actually say that it’s got to be taken literally...could you imagine the Psalms - talking about the sun, you know, rising and running the race? You know, he’s talking poetically, that’s what he is saying. He’s not giving you facts, he’s only giving you things as he sees them.”

Not only is there here an acknowledgement of literary diversity within the Bible. There is also a recognition that the content of the scriptures is conditioned by the perspective of the narrator. Stories and teachings are to be interpreted in light of the historical and cultural context in which the author is writing. In an effort to retain an idea of divine authority, one parishioner claimed that the Bible is ‘God-breathed’ but was also written by various authors in different cultural contexts. The ‘meaning’ of the scriptures is therefore something to be generated from an act of interpretation, something to be unpicked from the complexities of the texts. Given that the scriptures are taken to be ridden with symbolism and are subject to the contingencies of authorship, we might ask how its so-called ‘essential’ truths are accessed?

In interviews, parishioners expressed two approaches to this problem, two kinds of appeal to two different sources of authority. They are not affirmed as mutually exclusive nor in consistent terms, but they are discernible as methods of interpretation embraced by congregational members. The first is often implied rather than openly developed, and refers to rational, scholarly argument as an authority by which to unpack and elucidate the Biblical narratives.

To take one example, Hannah feels that the scriptures are a resource, to be used according to personal need. She is aware of how history and culture complicate our attempts to find truth in them, but does not see this as an irresolvable issue. As she says, "...I think you can apply a bit of common sense to that and see how things tie up with independent historical records." In her estimation, the 'factual authority' of historical records over-rides that which might be inherent in the scriptures themselves. An appeal to scientific and scholarly arguments is also apparent in sermons and public teaching. The 'authority' of the scriptures is sometimes spoken of as a matter of historicity, and the authenticity of the texts is seen to be strengthened by referring to literary or archaeological evidence. In this sense, the evangelicals of St Michael's affirm what might be called *historical foundationalism*, i.e. the belief that the Bible can be demonstrated as more or less reliable by advancing arguments for the historical authenticity of different passages. This may be seen as discontinuous with the stress on symbolism discussed above, but no sense of tension is acknowledged by parishioners. Rather, scriptures are read according to the specific needs of the immediate context. According to parishioners, this approach does not equate to inconsistency, but allows a 'full' appreciation of the richness of the texts.

In relying upon secular canons of authority, parishioners imply a weak sense of the Bible's own. The scriptures are no longer taken as an authority before all others, but as subject to the limitations imposed upon it by the findings of science and the norms of rational thought. Doubtless this has a lot to do with the demography of the congregation, the majority of whom have had their perspectives shaped by higher education and their faith lives continually nurtured by an educated church community. Some are even conversant with the issues of Biblical criticism after short courses in Bible college and extensive reading.

While some appear to put scriptures in the service of science, others divide the two, thus evading problems of conflict. For one minister, science provides the answers to questions the Bible does not attempt to answer. While science concerns itself with questions of fact, the scriptures are preoccupied with questions of meaning, with "why [things] happened." Factual claims in the texts are thus regarded as of secondary importance to questions of salvation, which are seen as couched in a different, theological idiom. The 'essential' truths for this minister are about having a loving relationship with God, and this is invoked as overriding the minutiae of belief or doctrine.

"...if the world wasn't created in seven days...in a way, well, it's neither here nor there. When I get to heaven, God is not going to tell me, and did you believe my creation or not? He is going to say, welcome home son, it's good to see you. Ultimately, that is what is important."

To defer the 'how' questions to science marks a clear capitulation to secular modernity, an ongoing 'bargaining process with secular thought' (Berger, 1980: 158-9). As the norms of scientific rationality are increasingly embraced, so the truth status of *the scriptures alone* is eroded, and their function shaped by modern forces that have effectively superseded them in importance. However, it is also important to note that

parishioners do not see a problem here. Rather, notions of symbolic truth and uncompromising authority are apparently held concurrently, invoked according to the demands of particular discursive contexts.

Martin Stringer finds a similar tension among statements of belief among Anglican, Roman Catholic and Independent churchgoers in Manchester. Stringer finds that members of a church tend to make regular use of disconnected belief statements while also affirming the existence of a system of beliefs, in which they are embedded (Stringer, 1999: 179-80). The latter reflects a need for authority, while the former is a consequence of how individual statements are shaped by the needs of different situations and interactive contexts (Stringer, 1996). Within St Michael's, Biblical authority is affirmed while popular invocations of its meaning and significance shift according to the rational convictions of individuals and the pastoral needs of the situation. My argument here is that this freedom of application is made possible by a general process of liberalisation that both broadens the boundaries of significance and increases the sense of tolerance extended to readings viewed as divergent or deviant. And while there is no top-down attempt to rein in the inevitable diversity that this produces, there is an unwavering affirmation of scriptural authority, which in turn conveys an illusion of shared purpose and mutual understanding.

The other source of enlightenment that is invoked with respect to understanding scripture is the Holy Spirit. According to one long-term parishioner,

“...I think that the whole of the Bible has a relevance in terms of laying down principles...and giving us information and insights of God's relationship with man...for me it is a very important guide, [an] inspiration for daily living...beyond the ...printed page, there is the Holy Spirit of God that opens one's mind, one's intellect to the reality of it. It's not just an intellectual analysis of what it's saying. There is a spiritual assistance, if you like, behind the mind.”

There is a sense in which the Holy Spirit is invoked as a guiding force through which individuals are able to perceive the meaning of scripture. This is a non-rational resource, felt within oneself and often conflated with ideas of conscience or instinct. Parishioners often tell stories of how they have been ‘led’ to a particularly apposite verse that guided them through a difficult time or provided them with well-needed advice. As June put it, “...on certain occasions, when I haven’t been looking for it, verses have jumped out and hit me, so I think God does speak to you through it [i.e. the Bible].”

Rational thought and the Holy Spirit are sometimes conceived as radically conflicting, relying as they do upon reason on the one hand, and subjectivity on the other. But their co-existence is unsurprising in St Michael’s given the educational background of the congregation and the charismatic history of the church. They are invoked as authorities to be drawn from in a way that does not generally provoke disagreement or conflict. What is significant here is that they both go hand in hand with a liberalising approach to Biblical interpretation. Rationality and intellectualism usurps the place of the Biblical in generating scientific or factual truth. Invoking the Holy Spirit relocates the act of interpretation within the subjectivities of the individual devotee. The meaning of the text is negotiated in terms of the subjective needs of the person, rather than as objective and non-negotiable truth.

This is the essence of what Hunter sees as the neo-orthodox position, that the Bible becomes the Word of God when read in faith (Hunter, 1987: 26-7), which is ultimately traced back to the thinking of Rudolf Bultmann (Grenz and Olson, 1992: 86-99). History is discarded, and the subjective experience of reading the texts is

determinant in the emergence of religious knowledge. The low score of 18% for this option in the survey precludes the need for any extended discussion. However, it does raise an important trend among the congregation, to prioritise the subjective experience of reading the texts over a more traditional understanding of scriptural truth. This foregrounds independent reading and reflects the perception that, in addition to fellowship, issues of Christian knowledge should be pursued on an autonomous, individual level.

This is more vividly apparent in statistics on devotional reading. According to survey results, 82% of the congregation have read C.S. Lewis at some point in their lives. The figures are 79% for the works of David Watson, 58% for John Stott and 58% for John Wimber. At the same time, more radical or innovative Christian writers are less popular: 21% have read Norman Vincent Peale, 6% Scott Peck and 4% Dave Tomlinson. It became clear to me during fieldwork that parishioners engage in an *pro-active* search for meaning, but within the confines of acceptability defined by the tradition of their church. But at the same time they embrace these authors in so far as they shed light on their own spiritual lives. In other words, Christian devotional literature – as with the scriptures – is selected according to evangelical convention, but appropriated in so far as it funds subjective Christian identities.

The Fate of Non-Believers

James Davison Hunter has called evangelical soteriology the most “socially offensive” aspect of Christian theology (Hunter, 1987: 34). All other models of salvation are viewed as patently false and the result of delusion or Satanic machinations. All those who do not profess faith in Jesus are seen as destined for eternal torment and

damnation. There is a sense in which boundaries are strongest at this point in the tradition, and the differences between those inside and those outside of the faith are often conceived in dichotomous terms (Noll, 1994). Although the British movement has generally softened this exclusivism (see chapter two), the spirit of separatism that it sustains – accompanied by a vociferous defence of moral purity - remains a resilient and potent identity marker within evangelical churches. As the vicar of St Michael's pointed out to me, and not without a degree of evangelistic urgency, "we're either for Jesus, or we're against him."

During interviews, I asked members of St Michael's about the salvation process as they understood it. Using evangelical language, I asked them: "how are we saved?" The responses they gave were fairly consistent, invoking the model of substitutionary atonement described above: we are saved by faith in Jesus as our Lord and saviour. This idea was not invoked naively, and many individuals jokingly reminded me that they knew this was the 'standard' answer. But the model of substitutionary atonement was not questioned or challenged in any serious way. However, when I turned to the question, "What will happen to those people who are not Christians?", people were far less certain. There was a discernible hesitancy and awkwardness in their responses that suggested they were not entirely comfortable with the issue. None were willing to commit to a definitive or uncompromising answer.

One might expect evangelicals to be comfortable with the notion that non-believers are destined for eternal punishment. Indeed, this belief may be seen as a source of strength and cohesion, reinforcing evangelical exclusivity. However, I found many interviewees consciously avoiding any degree of commitment to this traditional

position. Rather, they appeared more keen to embrace the possibility that outsiders might somehow be included in the destiny of the faithful. Some even turned the issue around, adopting a critical perspective on the narrow conceptions of evangelicals. As Alan expresses it,

“I would have to say that I think the term ‘Christian’ is wider than some evangelicals think it is, and I think the evangelical wing of the church has a very narrow idea of who is acceptable to God. I mean, God alone is judge and it’s not for us to decide whether only those who go through a... particular set of, actions get saved, or whether even just a ...simple, almost sub-conscious acknowledgement on someone’s part that actually God does exist is good enough. I don’t know, and it’s not for me to make any judgement.”

Alan’s comments are not untypical of the congregation as a whole. There is an implicit willingness to entertain, though not to openly embrace, a more liberal, inclusivist outlook on the fate of those who fall outside of the traditional evangelical boundaries of the faith. More clearly, there is a definite resistance towards unquestioningly accepting the view that non-believers are destined for punishment and damnation.

This is clearly reflected in questionnaire results. 67% of the congregation claim that those who are not saved will exist in hell, but as a state of *separation* from God. Only 10% opt for the traditional view of hell as a place of punishment, a figure matched by the proportion of respondents who say that we cannot know for sure. A further 9% claim that the unsaved will have a chance to confess their sins after death. Taken together, we arrive at a striking 86% of the congregation preferring to reject the understanding of hell as a place of punishment in favour of a less ‘offensive’ or less definitive option.

Interview responses suggest similar sentiments. One parishioner said that he believed

in hell as a place, but did not see God actively punishing people in it. Others openly endorsed the alternative notion of a place where God is absent, conceiving the individual's choice as between "eternity with God or eternity without God." A discomfort with eternal punishment is driven for some by a deep-felt concern for unconverted family members, while other parishioners feel that eternal punishment is simply inconsistent with the image of a loving God. As Hannah puts it, "I struggle with the idea that God can love us so much that...He'd be prepared to just let people trip off down into eternal misery..." All in all, the views of parishioners reflect the Church of England's 'official' position on hell rather than the more conservative report issued by the Evangelical Alliance (see chapter two).

Given this tendency to stress mercy and love over judgement and damnation, it is unsurprising that views about the fate of the unevangelised also follow a fairly liberal line. A perpetual problem for evangelicals is how they reconcile the need for faith in Jesus alone with the fact that some nations are untouched by missionary endeavour. How are these people to be judged, and what is their destiny? This is not an issue addressed often in St Michael's, either in informal discourse or church teaching. But when it did arise, for example, in small group discussion, a consistent perspective was adopted by many. That is the view, derived from Paul's letter to the Romans (2:6) that those untouched by the faith will be judged according to the light they have received, i.e. by factors other than an open confession of faith in Jesus. This is most frequently glossed in terms of whether people have the right 'heart', or as one minister put it, "they [the unevangelised] will be judged with their conscience". This is a common method of reconciling classical Christian soteriology with the notion of a just God. Its presence here implies a softening of boundaries that is also reflected in views on the

fate of the unsaved generally.

Just as parishioners appear more accepting of unbelievers generally, so they also tend to shy away from an openly condemning view of other faiths. The questionnaire asked parishioners about their views of a series of other religions, including world faiths such as Islam and Hinduism, and non-mainstream Christian groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons. Although the majority feel that most of these traditions are wrong and misguided, for most traditions a significant minority do not endorse the view that they should be converted to the true faith or denounced. That is, a sizeable portion of the congregation, while recognising these traditions as 'untrue', remain unwilling to advocate an actively negative response to them. For example, 54% feel that Islam is misguided and that Muslims should be brought to the true faith. Another 9% feel that Islam is the work of the devil. But 22%, while recognising that this tradition does not lead to God, feel that we should respect this tradition. Similar results emerge with respect to Buddhism and Hinduism, and 18% even view Judaism as an alternative path to the true God. Respondents are more conservative about marginal Christian groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, reflecting Mary Douglas' argument that it is phenomena which threaten group boundaries rather than phenomena which fall outside of them which are most problematic for religious groups (Douglas, 1966).

Interview responses, while not exclusively positive, exhibited a discernible effort to find positive qualities in other religions. Alan feels that other religions inevitably contain an element of truth, because of the universal breadth of God's creation and activity. Because God created the world, and lives in the world, surely many of the

world's religions "to a greater or lesser extent reflect something of the true myth." June goes further than this, suggesting that, although she feels that other religions are "on the wrong track", Christians could learn a lot from some of them. When I ask her to expand on this, she refers to the greater degree of moral discipline in other religions, which leads to less sexual immorality and abuse of the body. Hannah expresses a view that exceeds even this, veering closer to a kind of religious universalism (Quebedeaux, 1978: 20). Responding to my question about how she views other religions, she says,

"...if it is an attempt of whatever society to fill that God-shaped hole, I don't see any reason why it shouldn't be a search for the same God... I'm quite aware of the way that Christianity has become part and parcel of British culture and so I can see that just because I've taken this stance, it doesn't necessarily mean that I wouldn't have been a completely devoted Hindu if I had been brought up somewhere else...I think when it comes to the crunch, it's God's decision, and I think that's what's important."

These are isolated views, but their presence within an evangelical community is highly significant. They represent a shift away from an exclusivist and often antagonistic stance, to an outlook that underplays difference and even, in some cases, affirms a partially favourable perspective on non-Christian religions. To be fair, although they often express a meandering viewpoint, most respondents maintain that other religions are deficient in some way. But even then, they do not see this as sufficient grounds for condemning them. As Alan put it, "I can't condemn people for their religious convictions if they don't happen to align with mine." This attitude is commonplace within the tolerant, inclusivist discourses of multi-cultural Britain. But it is strikingly incongruent within a Christian community traditionally seen as conservative and 'firm in the faith'. If nothing else, the presence of these views in St Michael's proves the pervasion of the modern gentility and civility that Hunter found in the changing tradition of US evangelicalism in the 1980s. It is no longer seen as acceptable to openly affirm views that are socially offensive or which emphasise the

radical difference between those inside and those outside of the faith. An implicit accommodation to modern trends has made this so, consequently triggering a reconfiguration of evangelical values in a thoroughly liberal direction.

The Role and Status of Women

I have focussed upon movements of resistance and accommodation within areas of theological value. Restrictions on space prevent a more extended discussion of shared values amongst the congregation, although other areas of interest could be mentioned. Most clearly, both questionnaire and ethnographic data suggest a widespread conservatism on moral issues, especially sexual morality. 81% claim that homosexual relations between consenting adults are always wrong, with 90% and 73% saying the same for extra-marital sex and pre-marital sex respectively. The figures are 38%, 55% and 11% for Britain as a whole (Jowell *et al*, 1999), a comparison that draws out the severe way in which these issues are viewed among evangelical Christians.

This is to be expected among evangelical churches, the value structure of which is very much based on the integrity of traditional family roles. That which challenges or undermines the nuclear family – divorce, abortion, homosexuality - is frequently condemned in the strongest terms. It is quite surprising, therefore, to find within St Michael's a fairly liberal attitude towards the role and status of women. Questionnaire respondents were given the following statement: "The primary role of the Christian woman is to support her husband as provider by caring for the children and tending to the household duties." The following table compares the extent to which members of the St Michael's congregation agree with this, with responses drawn from the British Social Attitudes Survey.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree not disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Can't choose/ Don't know
St Michael's	–	30%	–	57%	–	8%
Britain	5%	13%	23%	34%	23%	0.5%

Table Three: Attitudes towards traditional gender roles within St Michael's and Britain (figures taken from the British Social Attitudes Survey, Jowell et al, 1999: 361).

Although the national sample was offered a larger series of options, if answers are grouped together certain patterns can be discerned. Notably, the proportion of respondents answering negatively is exactly the same for both St Michael's and Britain as a whole (57%). While a greater proportion of St Michael's congregants support this statement than those among the British population (30% versus 18%), supporters are still in the minority. Indications are that evangelical and wider cultural understandings of gender roles are closer than might be anticipated.

It is important not to overstate this point. While there are clear indications of a majority unease with traditionalist understandings of gender roles, St Michael's retains a deep concern for what might be called 'family values'. It fosters a shared culture which places marriage and the nuclear family unit at the centre of church life and as the end point of personal fulfilment. Homosexuality and co-habitation are regarded with a marked discomfort and occasionally provoke open condemnation. There is also an insidious pressure upon younger members to marry early, a trend which reflects church sponsored ideas of a shared lay ministry. Single members are made to feel a certain sense of incongruity because of their unmarried status. Common expectations of members and their contributions to church life are framed by the institution of the nuclear family, a persistent symbol of moral integrity and

wholesome living.

However, the statistics invoked above do suggest that, if this model is persistent, it is not impervious to modification, particularly with respect to understandings of authority. There are signs throughout the congregation that, while retaining the family as sovereign, roles within the nuclear family are open to reconfiguration and rearrangement. For example, I encountered several married men who were taking time out of their careers to look after their children. The congregation features a number of respected female professionals, including doctors, university lecturers, school teachers and social workers, who appear to provoke no significant disapproval from more traditionalist members. Analysis of the church address list reveals that, of the 210 adult female members of the congregation fit for work, under retirement age and not in education, only 35 (16%) are full-time housewives. Of those working, 62% work part-time and 38% work full-time. The ideal model of the nuclear family has been at least partially accommodated to modern standards of equal gender opportunities and the acceptance of women in the workplace.

A shift away from an acceptance of male dominance is also evident in advice offered by church leaders. At an *Alpha* course session, one preacher claimed that Paul's teachings on marriage do not imply total submission by a wife to her husband. Rather, the essence of his message is really about having the right relationship - a sentiment notable for its ambivalence as well as its liberal slant. When pressed on particularly conservative teachings from the Old Testament, he reverted to a relativist position, and spoke of the importance of putting these passages in their historical context. There is a discernible tendency to avoid any advocacy of a traditionalist, patriarchal position,

or to give it Biblical endorsement.

An egalitarian spirit is most evident in attitudes towards authority roles which, it appears, are only minimally associated with gender difference. A mere 6% agree that the Bible teaches that women are subordinate to men. Only 24% agree that women should always obey their husbands, a figure that actually surprised the church coordinator when I discussed the survey results with him. Liberal views are extended into issues of leadership in the church, with 78% *disagreeing* with the statement that all members of the clergy should be male. Faced with the statement, “Women should never occupy positions of leadership in a church”, 88% disagree. And 73% *support* the notion that women should be given equal opportunities to men to serve the church *in every respect*.

It is true that the majority of the church leadership are men: three out of four clergy (with a female curate only appointed in 2002), all five of the lay readers and three out of the four churchwardens. But women often take on leadership roles in church services, and James informed me that there were actually more women than men among home group leaders. The vicar also commented that he would like more women to be involved in the leadership, and there are no discernible signs that he will be met with significant opposition from the congregation.

In sum, while entrenched leadership norms prevent the onset of radical institutional change – the arrival of a female vicar would, I was told, have provoked significant opposition – the congregation of St Michael’s exhibits a significant leaning towards the acceptance of gender equality in most areas of Christian practice. Questionnaire

responses, in particular, suggest an emphatic rejection of traditionalist ideas of femininity, which centre on domesticity, the nurture of children and a submission to male authority in one's spiritual life. Thus, while family values remain axiomatic, ideas about the distribution of authority have taken a decisive turn towards a capitulation to wider social trends.

Capitulating to Modernity?

Employing Hunter's understanding of modern change, these patterns of value can be explained as accommodations to specific dominant forces that are enshrined in processes of modernisation. Most strikingly, cultural pluralism promotes an 'ethic of civility' – a pressure to adopt a tolerant view of outsiders, in this case, non-believers and people of other faiths. Cultural norms of gender equality have also been embraced alongside, rather than in spite of, the continuing centrality of the nuclear family as the cornerstone of sound Christian living. In both cases, wider secular norms have been absorbed into the evangelical subculture, causing an erosion of traditional standards and a blurring of the boundaries that mark out evangelicals as distinct from the modern culture that surrounds them. Shared values have become more liberal and less offensive to outsiders, and the integrity of internal barriers has given way to a less fixed, almost exploratory approach to dealing with ultimate reality.

We could invoke the dominance of scientific rationalism as the force which has undermined literalist readings of the Bible and ushered intellectual argument into evangelical discourse. But treatments of the scriptures also invoke the Holy Spirit as a guiding light and source of meaning. Tempered intellectual scepticism co-exists with a belief in the reality of supernatural powers and their role in human affairs. In this

sense St Michael's exhibits aspects of the 'post-modern primitivism' that Miller finds in 'new paradigm' churches (Miller, 1997: 125). While literalism is rejected, a more subjective source of knowledge is invoked that effectively undermines the rationalism of the modern project. Unlike 'new paradigm' Christians, however, St Michael's members appear to embrace these two authorities – rational thought and subjective experience – concurrently. One is not seen as undermining the other, and neither do they appear to generate a tension within the shared discourses of the community. In this respect St Michael's retains both rationality and experience as resources to be drawn from according to personal need and shifting context (Beckford, 1989).

On another level, the key issue here is not modernisation as a macro social process, but the construction of a 'modernity' by the congregation, with reference to which they may then define their own value structure. In addition to expressing a religiosity which reflects their social status, thus embodying the values of the modern project, parishioners also collude in a collective construction - wholly negative - of secular modernity. Unlike many fundamentalist groups, the congregation do not tend to associate modernity with science or secular learning (Percy, 1996), embracing these positively alongside Biblical inspiration and charismatic healing. Rather, understandings of secular modernity centre on moral depravity and licentiousness, a breakdown in community and traditional bonds of mutual commitment, and an impression that non-Christians caught up in this are spiritually homeless.

Therefore, simultaneously, congregants are bound up in modern change while also rallying against it. This is important to note, as it captures Dale McConkey's insight that, essential to the social integrity of evangelicalism is its sense of distinctiveness

from secular culture (McConkey, 2001). While many of the St Michael's congregants embrace a set of beliefs which are significantly 'liberalised', in one sense the boundaries of the community depend upon this *not* being seen as a capitulation but as a continuation of evangelical tradition. By way of this process, understandings of the evangelical worldview are reflexively developed and reconstructed, along increasingly broad guidelines.

Interlude: Statistical Correlations

(1) The Generation Factor

Numerous authors have noted the importance of generational differences in shaping attitudes (e.g. Beaudoin, 1998; Flory and Miller, 2000; Roof, 1993; Tipton, 1982). And authors such as Hunter (1987) and Jensen (2000) have demonstrated how reconfigurations of evangelical tradition are driven by the changing cultural identities of the generations graduating into its adult membership. When there is a process of value change – especially in a liberal direction – it is to be expected that this will be in large part sustained by the younger adult members of a social group (Hunter, 1987: 14).

With this issue in mind, questionnaire responses have been cross-tabulated with the factor of age in order to explore possible correlations. In order to simplify the analysis, age cohorts were grouped into three categories: a. 19-29, b. 30-59 and c. 60+. Even then, because of the small size of the sample, it is difficult to argue for relationships which are statistically significant. Age was measured against responses to questions on life after death, the truth status of scripture, human nature, other religions, moral issues and participation in 'New Age' practices. For all, levels of significance were

way below acceptable levels – responses were so evenly distributed across age groups that it is impossible to rule out the possibility that any correlation occurred by chance. Of course, an alternative explanation would be that the distribution of views on these issues occurs independent of age. In this case, the selective liberalisation described above will have occurred across the congregation, regardless of factors of generation. In other words, all age-groups appear to be equally liberalised, indicating the long term tendency of the church to attract and sustain liberal evangelicals, or possibly that a liberalised outlook has been fostered within the congregation for a long time. The ‘spiritual diversity’ of the 1980s may have taken root amongst a broad and committed faction of the church.

Statistical analysis does show that younger members are less likely than the middle group to give a scriptural reading in church, lead a home group meeting or approach a church leader for advice. However, this may be an expected consequence of youth or inexperience within St Michael’s, and does not necessarily indicate a lower level of commitment. Though it may reflect a tendency to reserve roles and positions of authority for older members.

Another correlation is more predictable, and concerns attitudes towards the role of women in the home among the oldest age group (60+). While the congregation as a whole reject a traditional division of labour by gender (and the two younger age groups do so by a large margin), 60% of those over sixty support this model. Given the above argument that many areas of belief given to liberal tendencies apply across age groups, it would appear that attitudes towards gender are more resilient among older members. In other words, as far as views on conjugal roles are concerned, age

may well override church culture as a determining factor. This may also be the case with other topics - views on the requirements of moral decency would be a possible example - but it is impossible to argue this given the restrictions of the current data set.

(2) The Gender Factor

Divergent patterns in attitudes might also be expected among men and women, given that evangelical communities often endorse a division of gender roles at odds with the cultural norm. However, statistics suggest that gender is not a reliable indicator of attitudinal difference on any of the topics addressed. Even on the traditional model of the caring domestic female, men appear just as likely to support or reject this as women. This is working from the assumption that a consistent lack of statistically significant correlations reflects a reasonably even distribution of attitudes. This is of course questionable, and a larger sample of the congregation may produce different results. But assuming our reading of the figures is reliable, then men and women do not differ significantly in their attitudes, suggesting that the congregation is both integrated and that females do not generally feel isolated or marginalised from the main body or the values they feel it represents. Indeed, this reflects observations in the field: while I met several individuals who felt marginalised from the church, none of these explained this experience in terms of gender prejudice.

The liberalisation implied in the above discussion appears to be a trend that has remained embedded and active within the congregation for some time. The meso-level developments described in chapter two - in leadership, evangelistic projects and congregational structure - do suggest an increasingly broad vision, upset by a

narrowing of focus in the early 1990s. With this in mind it is fair to describe the dominant, most enduring worldview entertained by the congregation as a relatively liberalised one for an evangelical community. Whether it has entertained these values since the 1980s, or before is difficult to say. The church has always been progressive in its ecclesiology, and this is well documented (Saunders and Sansom, 1992; Watson, 1983), but without comparable survey data from an earlier time, it is difficult to argue with certainty for attitudinal change. The best evidence for liberalisation as a process is the existence of liberal views among older, long-term parishioners, rather than just among younger newcomers. However, a larger survey may produce different results.

In spite of its current belief structure – which is undeniably liberalised in the ways described above - St Michael's has continued to attract, and sustain, a strongly conservative element (exemplified by James, above). These congregants are aware of this liberal trend and identify it as a problem. Indeed, both perspectives - broad and more monolithic - are clearly accommodated by the subculture of this church. This is highlighted by the survey responses to issues such as the authority of scripture, the nature of humanity, life after death, baptism and the status of other religions, all of which split the congregation into significant divisions, though cross tabulation does not suggest factionalism. The following section addresses the ways in which the tensions that this highlights are managed by St Michael's as an internally diverse evangelical community.

Negotiating the Boundaries of the Faith

The above discussion demonstrates that the St Michael's congregation is 'liberalised' in two related respects. First, a large proportion of its members embrace 'liberal'

views on key issues such as the truth status of scripture and the place of women. This indicates a re-drawing of the boundaries of the evangelical worldview along broad lines, centring on tolerance, universalism and an openness to spiritual exploration (Hunter, 1987). Second, as this outlook tends to exist hand in hand with a sense of freedom in the rethinking of tradition, it also tends to engender more individualistic understandings of faith. In other words, liberalisation often also generates diversification, and both trends are evident among this congregation.

However, the existence of critical figures such as James (see above) suggests that such trends are not embraced positively throughout the community. Indeed, field research revealed a significant contingent of members who appeared far more conservative – emphasising exclusivism, moral discipline and traditionalist gender roles – than the aggregated questionnaire results suggest. There is clearly a lack of agreement within the congregation on what the essentials of Christianity actually mean when translated into norms of belief and practice.

The majority of scholars in the sociology of religion associate liberalisation and diversification with the fragmentation and decline of religious groups (Bruce, 1989; Wilson, 1967). The perceived lack of a common core of belief undermines the possibility of group cohesion. Moreover, according to Peter Berger and Steve Bruce, liberalisation compromises conservative religious groups by eroding their sense of difference from the outside world. In undermining these boundaries, they also undermine the reasons individuals have for remaining members (Berger, 1969; Bruce, 1989: 152-3). As the boundaries of evangelical identity become ever more blurred and subject to popular contestation, it is reasonable to expect members to drift away as

fission and individualisation occur among the congregation's ranks. However, as demonstrated in chapter two, St Michael's is a thriving church by national comparison, achieving high attendance levels and elicits a significant degree of practical commitment from its members. While it has experienced some decline in attendances since the late 1980s, this has not offset its comparative success. Moreover, as demonstrated in chapter two, the most significant period of decline in recent times coincided with a turn to a more conservative, rather than liberal, theology. If attrition has occurred, there is no evidence that this has simply proceeded in parallel with the expansion of liberal beliefs among the congregation.

This apparent paradox provokes the obvious question: how are the tensions generated by liberalisation dealt with in St Michael's in such a way that processes of attrition and fragmentation are allayed? Put another way, how is a sense of unity and inclusion fostered in a congregation whose members are characterised by an apparently diverse and liberalised culture of belief? Part of the answer, I argue, lies in the way the church organises its public discourse, that is, how it communicates its identity discursively to its members (Becker, 1999: 90). For it is by way of this process that sufficient boundaries are set in place to hold the divergent positions within the congregation together.

In describing the complex processes which achieve this, it will be useful to draw insights from Pink Dandelion's *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers* (1996). According to Dandelion, contemporary Quaker belief is characterised by a pervasive liberalism. This is typified by a significant acceptance of internal diversity, grounded in the perceived need to affirm the diverse religious experiences of

individuals. However, this is framed by what he calls a credalised of form and practice (Dandelion, 1996: 101); while a diversity of belief is accepted, the spiritual practices of the group are generally defended in a way which leaves them relatively non-negotiable. Practice becomes 'credalised'. While it is possible for an individual to disagree with other members on matters of Quaker belief, and still remain within the group, disagreements on norms of Quaker practice are more likely to cause fracture and be accepted as in sufficient contravention of group order to warrant disinvolvement (Dandelion, 1996: 102). In this case, it is practice which forms the focus of group identity and shared boundaries.

Similarly, St Michael's exists as a liberalised group, at least by standards internal to its (evangelical) tradition. This liberalisation is acknowledged by some members, opposed by others, and is embraced as an indication of positive diversity by most of the leadership. However, a sizeable conservative element and the negative associations of liberalism within the evangelical world prevents this from becoming the 'dominant discourse' (Baumann, 1996). In other words, the notion of a liberalised worldview is prevented from entering 'official' expressions of group value, such as a mission statement (St Michael's has none), because of the tensions which associated notions of compromise, worldliness and a lack of direction generate. An inevitable and apparently irresolvable clash of viewpoints persists. However, like the Quakers of Dandelion's study, the St Michael's congregation is held together by a mechanism that ensures a sense of unity and which consolidates a set of boundaries around the community. While contemporary Quaker groups are held together by a discourse about practice, St Michael's is held together by a discourse which accommodates its various schools of belief while also controlling public utterance so that conflict is

avoided. While this discourse is discernible in prayer, prophecy and other forms of public address, I shall take Sunday sermons as an illustrative example.

Sermons: Trends in Public Teaching

During fieldwork, I listened to forty-nine sermons at St Michael's, delivered by various preachers at the morning, family and evening services each Sunday. I took detailed notes on each of them, either during or after the event, and several were also made available to me as cassette recordings. Although they purported to focus on numerous topics – sometimes dictated by the readings suggested in the *Common Lectionary* – subsequent analysis revealed a tendency to focus on certain issues on a regular basis, and with the same key emphases. Central to the majority of sermons were three main areas of concern, which can be called universal sin, conversionism and the ongoing Christian life. I take these in turn.

First, there was a continual emphasis upon a vision of humankind that was both uniformist and thoroughly negative. As Roger Simpson preached on one occasion, humans are basically all the same and are typified by misery and a tendency to fail. Attending Sunday services, I was repeatedly struck by the emphasis upon the inevitability of sin and wretchedness, which was stressed in in-house versions of the liturgical confession as well as by preachers and in prayer. This stress on the negativity of mankind is a natural accompaniment to a belief in substitutionary atonement, which is its theological resolution. But the stress on sin and confession extended beyond the logic of shared theologies, and fostered what Stephen Warner has called a “culture of public humbling”, a readiness to express a mutual neediness which opens the way for religious exchange and mutual support within the fellowship

(Warner, 1988: 293-4). This sense of humility was repeatedly stressed by Roger Simpson, whose claims to being a normal 'sinner' were an effective levelling device, his parishioners often remarking to me on how reassured they felt that their vicar was as imperfect as they were.

Second, sermons were ridden with a repeated call to faith and to repentance, emphasising the need for parishioners to base their lives "entirely on Jesus" and to accept and embrace the Holy Spirit. In Bebbington's terms, there was an overwhelming focus upon conversionism (Bebbington, 1989). This was rather curious in one respect, as key evangelical themes were constantly repeated and rarely developed, sermons often evoking the style of a revivalist altar call rather than an ongoing body of teaching, steered towards the nurturing of an established parish community. It is possible that 'elective parochials' and visitors were kept firmly in mind, so that preaching retained an evangelistic urgency and I actually heard of no complaints from the congregation that their sermons were insufficiently didactic. Congregants appeared perfectly happy to hear the same message of faith and repentance each week, possibly focussing upon the emotive draw of sung worship and charismatic gifts as their source of fulfilment.

Invoking a call to convert and turn to Christ, it would only be logical for sermons to also address the practical consequences of this radical change of identity, which takes us to our third area: the Christian life. This formed a large part of public teaching, and preachers always found room to emphasise the importance of prayer, financial giving, reaching out to the needy, embracing charismatic gifts and developing the God-given gifts of individual members. What was striking about their presentation was the

abstract or non-committal way in which they were dealt with. For example, the associate minister concluded one morning sermon with a call for us all to embrace the Holy Spirit in our lives. He then went on to say that he was not going to define what this meant, but that we should put this idea into practice ourselves and find out that way. The common teaching on financial giving was that, although important, it was not a “Gospel issue” and should be left up to the conscience of the individual. In sum, while congregants were implored to follow a devoted, Spirit-filled life of prayer, sacrifice and neighbourly love, preachers left these ideas in such a vague and malleable form that they could easily be moulded to fit the existing everyday lives of the average member. A radical challenge becomes a mild accommodation.

These common trends are summarised in the following diagram.

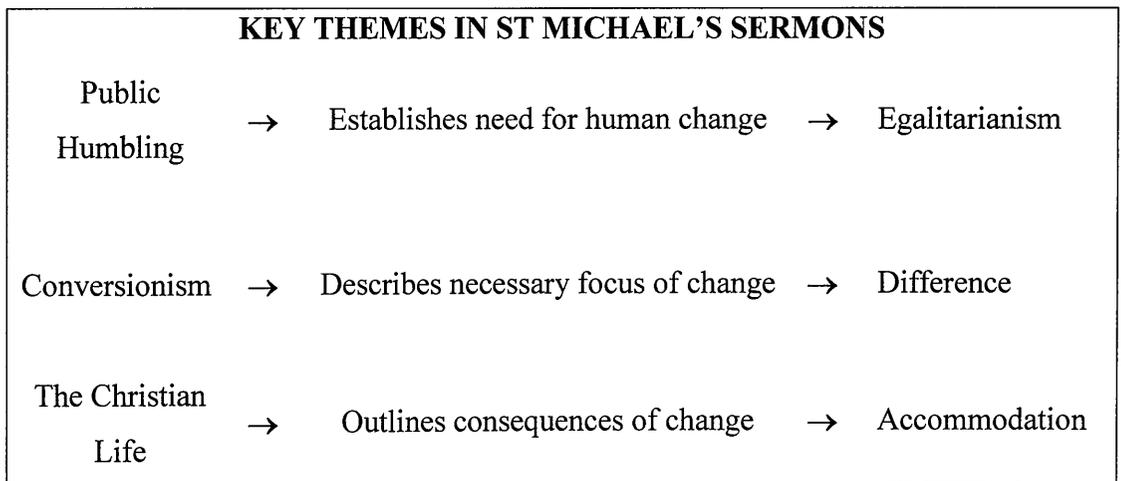


Figure Four: Key themes in public teaching

Sermons are interesting not only for what they cover but also for what they avoid or fail to comment on. One notable omission from sermons – and from all public discourse in fact – was moral teaching. This was especially striking, considering the usual emphasis that evangelical churches place upon correct Christian living and the ethical integrity derived from a resistance to the temptations of the world (Hunter,

1987: 57). Of all forty-nine sermons analysed, I found only three clear references to moral issues that also offered a clear judgement on them. Other references were largely embedded in narratives aimed at communicating a different message, so that on occasion, issues such as abortion were mentioned but left without moral comment. On other occasions, a sense of moral prescription was implied, but not concretised, as in one preacher's comment that the Bible is a good source of reproof and correction, as well as guidance. What he failed to point out was what it was the Bible actually says is worthy of reproof. More emphasis was placed throughout on positive qualities like love, care and responsibility, usually invoked in the abstract. On the rare occasions when a preacher isolated particular qualities as morally wrong, the solution suggested was not behavioural reform as such, but an openness to the Holy Spirit in the same vague vein discussed earlier. A classic example is provided in this excerpt from a midweek sermon given by the vicar on living a moral life before God.

So how can we deal with these problems of hypocrisy, greed and faithlessness, which the vicar says are "common sins in the West"? Roger says the best way to put them right is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. To eradicate hypocrisy in our lives, we need to ask God to fill us with the Holy Spirit of Truth. To combat greed, we need to ask God to fill us with the Holy Spirit of love, which will inspire us to give, rather than receive. And to deal with faithlessness, we need to ask God to fill us with the Holy Spirit of holiness. And we need to be filled with the Spirit everyday – we cannot live off yesterday... (from field-notes, 16/2/00)

In short, sermons were characterised by both an evasion of moral issues and by a tendency to avoid offering specific moral prescriptions and sanctions. As with

teachings on the ‘Christian life’, advice was more often than not vague, malleable and open to interpretation.

The lack of clear moral instruction within the public discourse of St Michael’s is especially curious as, according to survey data, individual members express highly conservative views on personal moral conduct, especially sexual morality (see table four).

Action	% of the congregation claiming this as ‘always wrong’
Homosexual relations between consenting adults	81%
Adultery	90%
Premarital Sex	73%
Drinking to Excess	67%
Smoking	48%
Using Profanity/swearing	64%

Table Four: Moral conservatism among the St Michael’s congregation.

Moreover, the overwhelming majority also feel that the church *should* speak out on such moral issues: 81% claim this for abortion, 90% for extra marital affairs, 87% for homosexuality, 91% for the Third world, 72% for unemployment, 78% for euthanasia. What we are faced with is a separation of public and private discourses, the first characterised by a general tolerance and the second by a rather strict moral economy. Furthermore, the fact that 76% also claim that St Michael’s Sunday sermons adequately cover moral teaching suggests that parishioners are, on the whole, satisfied with this arrangement. One explanation of this would be that such moral teaching is so well-entrenched among the congregation that there is no need for it to be taught. However, the fact that preachers clearly cater to ‘elective parochials’ – most clearly in the essentialist conversionist message outlined above – suggests that there is a felt

need to repeatedly address core aspects of the faith life explicitly.

I would rather argue that the reason moral judgement and practical prescription are avoided relates to the need to accommodate the liberal diversity of belief within the congregation. There is a collective requirement for a shared public discourse which underplays issues likely to provoke conflict or divide the congregation. Field observations suggest that an individual freedom of spirituality is valued by many members, to a point where they view firm instruction on how to conduct one's moral or spiritual life to be an affront to personal autonomy. Indeed, styles of leadership reflect this, leaders remaining firm and convicted but at the same time gentle and encouraging rather than merely prescriptive. In this sense there is a strong sense of the privatisation of religious identity – the Christian life is, to a degree, something forged around personal need rather than group goals (Becker, 1999: 197; Tipton, 1982). So, rather than risk alienating members, the church has developed a public discourse which leaves specific issues vague and consequently open to individual interpretation, reflecting a *selective privatisation*.

I say 'selective' because public discourse retains a conservative, 'hard' stance on certain issues. Contrary to Hunter's comments on the liberalisation of evangelicalism, anything that hinted of moral or religious absolutism or intolerance *was not underplayed* (Hunter, 1987: 183). Rather, public teaching presents itself as a curious mixture of hard, traditionalist doctrine and soft, ambiguous or non-judgemental commentary that hints at a more tolerant outlook. While it avoids moral issues, affirms a generalised, undefined picture of the faith life, and an overall emphasis on accommodating to diversity within the group, public discourse also stresses sin, the

moral depravity of secular modernity, and the consequent radical difference between those inside and those outside of the faith. Conversely, privately expressed convictions downplay notions of hell and punishment for the unsaved, and veer away from affirming strong boundaries between the saved and unsaved. At the same time, they reflect a thoroughly conservative take on moral issues, especially on sexual matters (see above). This complex pattern is summarised in figure five.

SCRIPTURE AS FOUNDATIONAL AUTHORITY	
(Drawn from according to context)	
Private Discourses	Public Discourses
Ambivalent Anthropology	Conservative Anthropology
Conservative Morality	Inclusive, affirmative morality

Figure Five: Selective Privatisation amongst the St Michael's congregation.

In summary, while aspects of the shared evangelical worldview held within St Michael's have clearly been liberalised, this process has become subject to a notable selectivity, by topic as well as by context. Divergent emphases can be found in public and in private discourses. Of course, expressions of belief are inevitably shaped by contextual factors, and changing contextual needs generate significant variations in the kind of claims individuals make (Stringer, 1996). But these variations are not random, and the patterns described above suggest an ordered system, whereby certain issues are privatised and others dominate public exchange. I would argue that this system has become infused into the shared culture of St Michael's as a method for the

avoidance of in-group conflict. Dandelion speaks of disputes over norms of Quaker practice as provoking conflict and disinvolvement. The equivalent trigger for St Michael's would be the mobilisation of ideas which challenge the framework described above, characterised as a selective balance of liberal and conservative convictions.

Public Tensions and the Avoidance of Conflict

Simply put, the boundaries of the group have come to coalesce around a set of ideas which encompasses both liberal (open, broad and tolerant) and conservative (narrow, exclusivist) camps, while attempting to compromise neither. Indeed, the public discourse – exemplified in sermons, public prayers, prophecy and any other spoken address open to the congregation as a whole - functions as a unifying force by keeping these two ‘narratives’ in tension. It does this by avoiding the open endorsement of extreme positions and evading issues likely to provoke disagreement. Effectively, liberalisation and re-traditionalisation appear as co-existent forces working within the same community, but without any kind of resolution that could be construed as compromise. While Dandelion's Quakers are bound together by a credalised form, the congregants of St Michael's achieve a sense of inclusion by selectively latching onto aspects of an available public discourse. Fracture occurs, not when members disagree with this discourse as such, but when they *openly* endorse one pole of the tension at the expense of the other, and in so doing dissolve the delicate separation of public and private discourses. Hence it is tension – but also its propensity to hold conflict at bay – that generates unity, and which consolidates the boundaries of congregational identity.

A glance at the history of St Michael's suggests that this pattern may have been entrenched within congregational culture for some time, as key moments of fracture have occurred only when it has been challenged. In the early 1980s, under the influence of American Restorationists, a splinter group broke away from the church because of disagreements over women's leadership and the authority of charismatic prophecy. In the mid 1990s, David White's incumbency introduced a similarly narrow vision of Christian practice, based around supernaturalist theology, a conservative take on ethics and gender roles, and a paternalistic approach to leadership. Parishioners remember with raised eyebrows his introductory sermon, in which he described himself as a "benign dictator". On both occasions, a narrow, monolithic – almost exclusively charismatic - theology was rejected by the congregational majority, protest becoming mobilised in significant disinvolvement. The reaffirmation of a 'spirituality of diversity' can also be read into the appointment of Roger Simpson who, in many ways personifies the internally perceived identity of St Michael's: middle class, with a large family, of sound evangelical pedigree and, unlike his predecessors, an extrovert. Most importantly, he is a priest with an eclectic vision.

Extremes of the liberal kind are unsurprisingly less common, although the *Visions* group may be seen as an example. *Visions* embody a form of worship which many in St Michael's cannot recognise as Christian, embracing an experimentalism that some find objectionable and misplaced. In this sense, they endorse an openness to change and diversity that is seen by some parishioners as excessively liberal. While they are not openly denounced and have not been ejected from the fellowship, they are certainly distanced and treated with some caution (see chapter six). It is developments such as these, which challenge the dominant tension of conservative and liberal

convictions, that render the boundaries of the congregation most clearly visible.

Conclusion

The process of liberalisation is subject to local filters which shape which aspects of a shared worldview are most susceptible to change and which are most resilient. Additionally, changes in the structure of shared values bring with them problems for the maintenance of a shared sense of unity and belonging. As the above analysis demonstrates, within the St Michael's congregation, understandings of what an 'evangelical' identity entails show significant diversity. And yet conflict is avoided and a sense of dissonance effectively minimised. The church is able to sustain a sense of unity in part because of its scale. While networks among the congregation are close-knit, no one can know everyone, and many parishioners only know one another by sight. Some long-term members rarely see one another as they attend different services each week, and the high number of visitors and elective parochials means that there is always a certain absence of intimacy at the Sunday service. St Michael's has no mission statement and many newcomers arrive with the simple expectation that this is a 'successful' charismatic evangelical church. Consequently, members rely on the public discourse for their impressions of what the congregation believes and represents.

Research into sermons "suggests that there is typically quite a large gap between what the preacher intends and what members of a congregation perceive." (Gill, 1999: 221) In conversation, Roger Simpson said that his main aim in sermons is to interpret the Bible, so that people understand it better, and his main hope that they have encountered Jesus in it. Conversations with individual parishioners revealed a vast diversity of responses to sermons, from boredom, to incredulity, enthusiasm, emotion,

deep reflection and an intention of changing their lives. But a clear latent function of sermons is the fostering of a sense of inclusion in a common purpose, and of membership and unity against the common enemy - variously glossed as western culture, moral decadence or Satan. But as noted above, unity is secured by avoiding issues likely to provoke conflict, thus revealing how public teaching responds to, as well as shapes, perceived congregational needs.

That the leadership should wish to adjust public teaching so as not to provoke dissonance is not surprising given the make-up of the congregation. The high number of visitors means that there is constant pressure to couch teaching in congenial rather than challenging terms, so as to retain rather than alienate potential new members. Moreover, according to Baumgartner's (1988) study of suburban culture, the tendency to suppress and avoid conflict is a characteristic of middle class communities. Becker, drawing from the work of Lewis Coser (1956), takes this idea further,

“Coser (1956) suggests that, more generally, groups where members have a close and family-like attachment suppress disagreement and avoid debate on political or social issues. One of the consequences of thinking of the congregation as a family, at least in this predominantly middle-class community, is the avoidance of issues and persons who seem overtly controversial, political, or ideological.” (Becker, 1999: 86-7)

While the scale of the church precludes a wholly family-like attachment among members, this model of relationality is taught and supported by the leadership and is embraced among networks of close-knit members. Becker's argument is that such attachments are often incongruent with the open debate or presentation of issues likely to provoke disagreement. This notion will be taken up again in chapter seven. It is enough to note here that an avoidance of conflict may be driven by the cultural style of the congregation as much as by the tensions produced by liberalisation.

SUMMARY

The members of St Michael-le-Belfrey express a version of the evangelical worldview which is significantly liberalised. Despite traditional survivals such as penal substitutionary atonement and the authority of scripture, many other attitudes are characterised by diversity and a general tolerance towards difference. Attitudes towards gender issues and towards other faiths veer towards the cultural norm. This liberal agenda – especially an appreciation of ‘spiritual diversity’ - appears to stretch across the congregation, though gender attitudes are more conservative among the old. However, some members identify this long-standing liberalisation as a problem, highlighting significant tensions within the community along a conservative/liberal divide. But dissonance and conflict are avoided through public discourse which evades issues likely to provoke conflict and retains a selective tension between conservative and more liberal sentiments.

CHAPTER FIVE SUBJECTIVITY AND EXPERIENCE

Introduction: 'Life is Basically Spiritual...'

As part of my questionnaire survey, I presented parishioners with the notion that 'life is basically spiritual' and asked for their responses to this idea. One respondent, a retired woman in her 60s, answered in depth, filling the back sheet of the questionnaire. This is what she had to say.

"The more I mature in the Christian faith, the more aware I become of the Spirit of God. I am usually aware of God's presence. Sometimes He is nearer than breathing, and at other times He is more distant. If I go through a period where I forego my quiet times, His presence recedes. At these times I suddenly realise that I am giving first priority to other things, rather than to God.

There have been some occasions (a few) in my life when I have been very afraid and could not pray, but it was at these times that the Holy Spirit seemed to take over, causing me to say whatever needed to be said to God. On these occasions my fear was completely removed and replaced by a deep peace.

At other times I have been guided in such mysterious ways that in my view this guidance could only have come from God.

Because of these experiences, I would agree that life is basically spiritual. In my case, it's all about choices. The more time I choose to spend with God, the more I am aware of His presence as I go about my daily life."

This parishioner affirms with some eloquence a series of themes that I began to discern among the St Michael's congregation as fieldwork progressed. She stresses the radical immanence of God and the close, guiding influence of the Holy Spirit. For her, life is basically spiritual because the presence of God pervades her daily experience. His presence is not unconditional, but requires that she prioritise her devotion to God over worldly matters. Above all, this is a presence and a closeness that implies an ongoing personal relationship between God and the individual believer. In theoretical terms, this indicates a turn to the subjective in that (1) the sacred is somehow present

within the self and enveloped within personal experience, and (2) this experience is described drawing from the subjective resources of the individual.

The account quoted above could be seen as fairly conventional discourse for a member of a charismatic evangelical church. Other questionnaire responses were more intriguing, and challenged my perceptions of the congregation and its understanding of spirituality. (In the following examples, I provide gender, age bracket and occupation in parentheses in order to add some sense of context). Some parishioners discerned in the word ‘spiritual’ a lack of substance or a basic imbalance, calling for a more grounded understanding of the Christian life. For example:

“In my opinion life is not basically spiritual – it is very real.”
(female, 40s, clerk)

“As Christians we should at all times be aware of how God’s Spirit is leading us/working. God recognises we have physical and intellectual needs too. It is little use being over spiritual when it prevents us being relevant to non-Christians.”
(female, 30s, housewife)

“We are spiritual beings but live in a material world. It has to be both.”
(female, 40s, retail manager)

Other respondents went the other way, affirming an understanding of the Christian life that was thoroughly bound up in the internal complexities of the spiritual self. For some, this was extended into a universalist notion of the spiritual.

“I believe that there is a spiritual element in everyone, which some acknowledge more than others. All of our activities affect us on a spiritual level even if we do not reason it out in that way.”
(female, 30s, housewife)

This would seem to conflict with the exclusivism traditional to evangelicalism, and also implies a conception of human nature that is basically benign, rather than sinful.

Another respondent endorsed an almost Trinitarian understanding of human nature, emphasising the role of the Holy Spirit in fostering an inner unity:

“Man is a “plurality in unity”. Spiritual, emotional, physical, mental, aspirational etc are all equal parts of a whole human being. Through new birth into union with Christ, the potential exists for God’s Holy Spirit to fill every part of this whole human being, giving life in all its fullness.”
 (male, 50s, retired)

This is less unorthodox, and suggests deep theological reflection. But the ‘plurality in unity’ notion hints at language traditionally used with reference to God, rather than man. It is a far cry from the Augustinian fallenness traditional to the evangelical worldview, which gels so well with ideas of substitutionary atonement and radical conversion.

The most unorthodox response came from a female parishioner whose conception of “our innate oneness with Spirit” veers close to understandings of selfhood most commonly associated with the ‘New Age’ (Heelas, 1996b).

“We become less spiritual as we become more sophisticated and materialistic. We are spiritual beings and much is lost between childhood and adulthood as we ‘learn’ to do things in a ‘socially acceptable’ way and suppress our ‘innate oneness’ with spirit. Under pressure to do what is ‘right’ in the eyes of others it is easy to ignore what we know instinctively to be right (and wrong).”
 (female, 40s, nurse)

But this woman was not alone in adopting ‘New Age’ language in speaking of the ‘spiritual’ in life. With a nod to a section in his local bookstore, one male parishioner claimed:

“Life consists of the body, the mind and the spirit. We should develop all three of them.”
 (male, 30s, scientist)

In asking parishioners about their understandings of life as basically spiritual, I was expecting – perhaps naively - to receive a collective endorsement of traditional charismatic theology: that life is only truly ‘spiritual’ for those who accept the Holy

Spirit into their lives and turn to Jesus. I got hints of this, as with the parishioner who claimed that “everyone has a spiritual need, [but] this can only be fulfilled in Jesus” and who added cynically, “not alternative religions.” But the majority of responses were varied, inconsistent and unorthodox. They exhibited little reference to doctrine or scripture, a striking tendency towards idiosyncrasy and an occasional evocation of the ‘New Age’. They embodied a search for the spiritual dimensions of the self, but sometimes without the apparent guidance of any obvious ordering paradigm. In this sense they signify a reliance upon subjectivity, but also a tendency towards significant diversity.

The Turn to the Subjective

According to Arnold Gehlen (1980), modern society is characterised by a pervasive deinstitutionalisation. A consequence of the complex patterns of social differentiation and pluralism described by Berger in *The Homeless Mind*, this is the process whereby “stable and well-defined patterns of individual conduct, social relationship, and thought lose their taken for granted plausibility.” (Hunter, 1982: 39) As institutions cease to provide answers to important existential questions, so individuals increasingly turn inwards to the resources of the self, a process Gehlen calls *subjectivisation*. In turn, subjectivisation gives rise to *subjectivism*, an orientation marked by a preoccupation with the self and an absorption in the complexities of individuality (Hunter, 1982: 40).

Robert Bellah has developed this idea in terms of two divergent orientations, common throughout contemporary western culture. Utilitarian individualism focuses upon the satisfaction of self-interest; expressive individualism focuses upon feelings and

intuitions associated with authenticity (Bellah *et al.*, 1985). It is the latter that has featured most in discussions of religious innovation in post-1960s western culture (e.g. Tipton, 1982). Substantively, expressive individualism engenders a preoccupation with the internal character of the self and of the relation of the self to other selves (subjectivity). In terms of the structure of religious forms, expressive individualism is thought to bring about fragmentation *via* an inevitable diversification. As individuals decreasingly rely upon external tradition for a sense of meaning, so their subjectivised religious identities become increasingly diverse and disconnected. (Casanova, 1994; Durkheim, in Pickering, 1975).

Such might be said of the examples from the St Michael's congregation offered above. Conceptions of the 'spiritual' are not necessarily nor predominantly shaped by the external authorities of scripture, doctrine or church tradition. Rather, they appear to be constructed with more reference to the internal resources of the self. The diversity of the sample suggests that individual parishioners are not participating in a single, unified tradition. Respondents are drawing from internally felt notions of significance, a pattern that suggests either the absence of a binding authority or its lack of plausibility in the eyes of these parishioners.

Some commentators have argued that a stress on 'experience' tends to lead to a "deregulated' spirituality" (Cartledge, 1998: 234; Cox, 1996), characterised by a lack of faith in tradition and a propensity for spiritual *bricolage*. The diversity of responses suggests that there is some substance to this argument, and that St Michael's parishioners are, to some extent, building their own spiritual identities out of the multitude of resources available to them. However, within St Michael's, the

invocation of the subjective as spiritually significant is not entirely without structure and order in the way it is invoked and negotiated as a source of meaning. It is the aim of this chapter to explore how subjectivisation shapes its culture and how a concern with experience influences shared priorities and values. I am most interested in how a process associated with the onset and furtherance of individualism is managed so as not to threaten a sense of unity among St Michael's members (thus building on the argument at the close of the previous chapter).

Subjectivity in St Michael's

Subjectivisation among British evangelicals was intensified by the charismatic renewal movement. Charismatic activity - glossolalia, 'words of knowledge' and emotional, impassioned sung worship – feature heavily in St Michael's services, prayer meetings and in some home groups. As such, parishioners embrace a spirituality that embraces the infusion of divine reality and power into everyday experience.

Many parishioners first attended St Michael's because of its reputation as a charismatic evangelical stronghold, and this informs their expectations of it. These individuals arrive with what might be called a 'charismatic ethos', a moral and aesthetic style or mood that has divinely touched subjective experience at its centre (Geertz, 1973: 127). They measure the vitality of the church by the extent to which this ethos is fostered and given channels of expression. Typically they are happiest in the evening service, support charismatic gifts in prayer meetings and prefer an emotional kind of worship.

Others embrace what might be called a ‘charismatic worldview’ (Geertz, 1973: 127), a comprehensive picture of reality as ordered according to the designs and powers of supernatural beings. This view often conflates human struggle with spiritual warfare between the forces of good and evil (Percy, 1996). Some parishioners feel that humans are inevitably caught up in this struggle, and are often preyed on by Satan. June explains the occurrence of sin in this way:

“...there is a battle – sometimes you can feel that within yourself, sometimes you’re pulled two ways. So I think people are tempted by Satan, and they give in, and that’s how evil happens..”

This supernaturalist model of reality is not embraced by all of the congregation, but evidence suggests that it is a significant aspect of Christian identity for the majority. According to my questionnaire survey, 79% believe in the devil as a ‘personal being who causes evil in the world’. That is, rather than an ‘impersonal force’ or something less clear. Belief in spiritual warfare is here inspired by the ‘signs and wonders’ ministry of John Wimber, who preached at St Michael’s several times during the 1980s and early 90s.

Charismatic discourse – as aesthetically or ontologically significant - pervades the interactive culture of the congregation. Some explain their continued attendance with reference to the influence of the Holy Spirit: “it’s where the Spirit has led me” or “I have a left few times but God kept dragging me back!” Some describe the church as “Spirit-filled” and many claim that they “felt the presence of the Lord” when they entered St Michael’s for the first time.

However, St Michael’s has been a long-term participant in the charismatic movement, and its congregation has endured the rather unsettling movements of the 1980s and

90s, including the ‘Third Wave’ – many had first-hand experience of John Wimber’s ‘signs and wonders’ team – and the Toronto Blessing. I argued in chapter two that at present, the charismatic movement may be characterised by routinisation and negative suspicion. Charismatic gifts have become a spiritual resource from which to draw according to personal need rather than a prescribed and expected set of defined practices (Walker, 1997). At the same time, a series of dramatised and emotionally intense ‘revivals’ have provoked widespread disillusionment and a turn away from charismatic experience altogether. Arguably, the former trend has been urged on by the latter, a sense of suspicion towards hyper-emotional episodes leading churches to switch to an outlook which stresses gifts as optional, occasional and altogether toned down. The general mood in St Michael’s could be characterised in this way, and fieldwork revealed no occasions of intense or extreme activity – no falling down, no being ‘slain in the Spirit’ and no hysterical laughter. The invocation of the subjective tended to take a more staid, discursive form, more story than possession. I take up the analysis through a consideration of narrative as a channel for the infusion of subjectivity with spiritual significance. I will later move on to ritual forms: glossolalia and public words of knowledge.

Personal Narratives

In recent times, it has become fashionable among anthropologists to emphasise narrative as constitutive of identity. According to the common argument, it is through our capacity as storytellers that we construct our identities and those of the people around us, including those subjects we attempt to understand as social scientists (Geertz, 1988; van Maanen, 1988). James Hopewell (1988) adopts the idea of narrative in his attempts to understand Christian congregations, arguing that

congregations construct their identities out of the stories and narratives they tell about themselves. Interestingly, he associates charismatic Christians with a romantic kind of tale, in so far as they stress the loving and dramatic heroism of God as He comes to save us on earth. God intervenes in history, thus suspending the normal laws of nature, in order to offer salvation to the individual. In accepting Him, the individual receives God's indwelling love and power (Hopewell, 1988: 61-2).

Although Hopewell's description of the charismatic narrative is idealised and perhaps far-fetched, it is not without substance, and certainly reflects many of the stories that the charismatics of St Michael's tell about themselves. Many of these have a dramatic, romantic tone, and all stress the loving intervention of God within the human realm. Such tales abound among church parishioners, and in speaking to them informally I was immediately struck by the extent to which their everyday discourse was punctuated with references to God's influence, guidance or presence, often in very concrete terms. Telling these stories is a way of infusing daily experience with order and meaning. By re-interpreting what might be described as the mundane into something that has been touched by the divine, congregants are imposing a loose theological framework which bestows plausibility onto their lives and grants them spiritual significance.

It will be useful to examine some examples. The following are derived from two main sources. Many are drawn from observations and conversations from the field - my encounters with charismatic ideas were predominantly through informal conversations with parishioners. I also draw from extended questionnaire responses. Respondents were asked to describe one experience that has been most significant to them in their

life as a Christian. Together, examples may be grouped into three overlapping categories: testimony, explanation and guidance.

The most ordered and ritualised presentations of God ‘working in one’s life’ are in *testimony*. These personal accounts of coming to faith or of crises within one’s faith life were often delivered by individuals in church, warmly encouraged by the vicar and generally followed by applause from the congregation. The following example was delivered at an evening service, following a Bible reading of the parable of the prodigal son.

The vicar invites Tom and his wife to come up to the front of the church. Apparently Tom has a story to tell us that is very much like that of the ‘lost son’. Tom, a tall, stocky man in his early forties, approaches the lectern and begins to tell the congregation the story of his conversion. In 1980, he was 22 and had an experience which left him converted to Christianity, as he says, I “invited Jesus into my life”. Tom was so passionate about his Christianity that he told all his friends about Jesus and managed to convert several of them within one week. He was reading his Bible and praying all of the time. He even took his Bible into the shower with him, wrapped in a plastic sheet! His devotion was rewarded. He had been earning £8 thousand a year; within twelve months, he was bringing in £70 thousand a year. Soon afterwards, he says “God allowed me to buy a bungalow” for £50 thousand, which was soon worth £250 thousand. He assures us that he is not boasting, but wants to talk about the extent to which God had blessed him. However, in the early 1990s things started to go wrong. He went bankrupt and “hit rock bottom”. He started taking soft drugs, and drank heavily. His wife left and divorced him and his son abandoned his

education with a drug problem. He describes himself as a very bad person, he had turned to sin. He was “in the pig swill”, just like the lost son. On the point of suicide, Tom sold everything he owned and went to Texas to stay with a friend. He describes himself as “an embarrassment” at this point – he couldn’t go anywhere, constantly breaking down in tears in public. Eventually, his friend persuaded him to go to church with him and, during the service, while the preacher was still speaking, Tom ran to the front and begged for forgiveness. He said he’d do anything, just live a simple life, just be a simple Christian, and begged God to forgive him. After this moment of crisis he was able to rebuild his life. It was too late for his first marriage - his wife had already remarried. But now he has a new wonderful wife, and talks about how wonderful things are now that he is “back with God.”

(adapted from fieldnotes, 17/10/99)

Tom’s story is in many ways typical of narrative testimonies given in contemporary charismatic revivalism. He stresses the temptations and evils of modern life (Warner, 1988: 83), conversion as radical existential transformation (Martin, 1990: 163) and a tendency to become a zealous Christian and evangelist immediately afterwards (Miller, 1997: 61, 78). Unlike many testimonies though, Tom’s lapse into moral decadence occurs after his conversion, and as a consequence of relying too heavily upon ‘worldly’ gratification. His account implicitly warns against the dangers of lapsing into complacency, of the ever-present danger of the world, and perhaps even of confusing worldly and divine favour. His experience has taught him this, and he sees his past in terms of God guiding him into a life of Christian integrity and moral decency. He says he ‘does alright’ now, but works alone and prefers to live a simple life, his aim simply being to “love God, love my wife and try to show love to all those around me.”

Tom's story echoes the testimonies given by numerous other St Michael's congregants, both in church and in ordinary conversation. During fieldwork, I noticed that it was clearly important to be able to readily draw from a defined narrative, and questions about conversion invariably prompted colourful and detailed stories of personal journey and identity transformation. Many stressed conversion as a passage from chaos into a new order, as the door into a new freedom, a freedom *from* corruption and decadence. Indeed, such oppositional pairs – chaos/order, slavery/freedom, uncertainty/surety - help to endorse and sustain the association of western modernity and secular culture with moral and spiritual bankruptcy. One parishioner captured this quite simply: "My faith is what keeps me sane."

Testimonies provide individuals with a narrative form through which to construct their spiritual biographies and make sense of their experience in terms of divine order. They allow individuals to capitalise on their subjective resources and present their evangelical identities in terms of a participation in a larger narrative, of revival, spiritual betterment and the ongoing struggle between Godly and ungodly forces.

A second kind of appeal to subjective experience focuses upon the explanation of especially fortuitous or unfortunate events. One member reported a time when he had been experiencing problems with his eyesight because of a computer monitor at work. When he was provided with a new computer, his explanation was that it was God who had provided for him. Another young female parishioner shared a story during an *Alpha* discussion session, about her quest to find a place to live in London, after applying for a job there. Her preference was for a nice flat, that was cheap, in the centre of London, where she could live with fellow Christians, who were also female.

Not only was she offered the job (which she claimed she was unqualified for), but a clergyman who was an acquaintance had managed to find her a flat fitting all of her criteria within four hours of her enquiry. Such fortuitous events are seen as divine blessings, as God caring for His flock through the human agencies of the everyday world.

For a congregation that exhibits some belief in spiritual warfare, it is not surprising to also find negative experiences attributed to Satanic influence, especially when they can be viewed as attempts to thwart the faithful. Referring to an agnostic work-mate who had rejected his invitations to attend St Michael's, one parishioner said that he had felt 'the enemy' at work. An *Alpha* discussion group leader once reported how, due to circumstances such as illness and family problems, certain leaders had been uncertain whether they would be able to attend the all-important *Alpha* 'Away Day'. As it happened, the day trip proceeded as planned, although she still explained these issues in terms of Satan, threatening the success of God's work. The assumption is that Satan has a great deal at stake in disrupting God's work (Csordas, 1997: 62).

Csordas argues for a connection here with the mode of reasoning that Evans-Pritchard identified in the witchcraft practices of the Azande (Evans-Pritchard, 1976). That is, witchcraft – as with superstition – serves to explain the coincidence of several factors which result in an especially fortuitous or unfortunate incident. This is especially important when this incident markedly enhances or threatens the goals of the group (Csordas, 1997: 62; cf. Abercrombie *et al*, 1970: 122). The distinction lies in how individuals respond to such affairs: witchcraft demands an inter-personal resolution which often engages social conflict; by contrast, Satanic interference or "demonic

harrassment” is “an affair for the self” (Csordas, 1997: 62). It does not provoke social conflict but refers to the individual’s struggle with supernatural powers. By focussing upon the subjective experience of individuals in isolation, this process enhances internal social cohesion. Individuals attribute good or bad fortune to agencies outside of the human remit while forging a shared discourse through which to discuss these encounters among their peers in the church. Moreover, while negative incidents are interpreted as an intentional threat to the existence of the group, they actually affirm group order by allowing an explanation of this threat in supernaturalist terms. In this vein, an appeal to subjectivity facilitates a cognitive function, as individuals together seek meaningful explanations of events in the light of a supernaturalist worldview.

A third form of subjective narrative has as its focus divine guidance – the perceived experience of divine intervention through advice, new knowledge or reassurance. Such accounts often arise in connection with prayer, but are also associated with dreams or ‘words from God’, i.e. messages which offer insight at moments of crisis or radical change. Consider the following example.

“After a few miscarriages a friend had a word from God for me regarding a new baby – she was wise enough not to tell me until the right time. It was a promise that this baby would be OK, that we were important enough for God to choose a godmother for my baby.”
 (female, 30s, learning support assistant)

Here, God’s blessing is received second hand, through a message delivered to a fellow Christian, although the message carries consequences for both the direct recipient and the person who is the subject of the message. God is treated as the source of future knowledge, but also *of comfort and as the guiding force behind a life decision* – choosing a god-mother for one’s child. Such instances which operate on an interpersonal level demonstrate the extent to which the common experience of divine immanence is entrenched within the culture of St Michael’s. It is shared among

members, a process that allows for the reinforcement of this belief and which fosters greater cohesion among congregants who share the same convictions.

It is the experiential element in charismatic evangelicalism that helps members to find solace and comfort through their inner lives. The culture of St Michael's stresses the intimacy and warmth of divine immanence, encouraging members to seek out Jesus as an ever-present guide and friend. Narrative accounts of such guidance can be specific and isolated, as in the example given above, but can also take the form of a general sense of reassurance, as in the retired woman who claimed that "...Jesus spoke to me through his word, telling me not to worry about my life, but to seek his kingdom and everything would fall into place." Other experiences of divine guidance amount to a radical turnabout in a life-changing decision, or the final urge to make a long-standing one. One elderly woman said she had received "very direct guidance from God" in obtaining her divorce. In her view, God had rescued her from her marriage.

Generally speaking, parishioners are encouraged to find meaning and direction in their ongoing experience of life, and respond by forging narratives that are shared among co-members. In this sense reality is seen as essentially orderly and pregnant with spiritual significance. Individuals are encouraged to engage in an "extended dialogue with the entirety of [their] experience, processing it for its latent spiritual implications." (Briers, 1993: 42) In this way even negative encounters, although often treated as Satanic in origin, are also often perceived retrospectively as having positive consequences by developing self-understanding and a knowledge of God.

Plausibility and Meaning

These examples demonstrate how narrative serves as a discursive method for achieving meaning; particularly because it is shared. As Peter Berger sagely comments, “the subjective reality of the world hangs on the thin thread of conversation.” (Berger, 1967: 26) Narrative tales are a basis of plausibility (Berger, 1969), for both those who hear them and, more importantly, for those who construct and tell them. These stories both situate the individual within a living discursive community, and within a divine plan, thus generating a sense of purpose, of ‘chosenness’, and of being cared for within the context of a network of divine *and* human relationships.

To be sure, if these narrative examples share an implicit theological framework, it is very broad, often conveying no more than the goodness, closeness and power of God. In this way it is more similar to a kind of ‘folk religion’ than to church doctrine (Clark, 1982). But it is this malleability that allows for such narratives to achieve such a universal appeal among the congregation. As they are largely shaped by the subjective experiences of the individual, rather than by external authorities, they allow for all aspects of social reality to be potentially infused with religious significance. This makes for a radically inclusive medium, as it does not discriminate according to Biblical knowledge or position in the church. Rather, all congregants are offered the opportunity to construct their own narratives shaped around their own subjective lives, thus affirming spiritual significance for their own social identities.

It is also worth noting that this use of subjectivity has a prophylactic function. If all of social reality is potentially touched by the supernatural, as these stories claim, then the

distinction between the sacred and the secular becomes meaningless. The world outside of the church is effectively integrated into a single meaning system, so that competing paradigms lose some of their secularising force. The secular arguments of an atheist colleague become the insidious machinations of the devil, and are thereby undermined as inevitably false and misguided. In this way secular and sacred are integrated into a single meaning system. Differentiation only has a propensity to fragment in so far as it is perceived to signal genuine difference. If this difference is undermined by a meaning system that incorporates all of reality into a divinely structured order, then for those who embrace this system, this difference will cease to be a threat. Stephen Briers finds the same phenomenon among Restorationists,

“This devolution of responsibility to individuals is actually a strategy that safeguards the long-term interests of the group. Because a person carries his spiritual awareness around with him, the nomos of the group is not undermined by the competing environments through which he moves.” (Briers, 1993: 44)

In summary, we may argue that the appeal to subjectivity through narrative serves three main functions. It bestows meaning, it offers inclusion in a community of experience and it acts as a counter-force against secular influence. However, like the liberalisation trend, it also fosters diversity and broadens conceptions of evangelical identity.

Subjectivity in Ritual Forms

Most of the narrative examples given above relate to the personal lives of individuals rather than their experiences within the context of congregational life. This may be partly because of the high turnover in St Michael’s – many parishioners have spent significant periods of time elsewhere. But it could also be due to the tendency towards privatisation and idiosyncrasy engendered by an embrace of the subjective. As individuals seek significance in the non-institutional, so they are less likely to

associate authentic spiritual experience exclusively with activities that are connected to congregational life. But trends in the embrace of subjectivity are also discernible in forms of ritual that are shared across the congregation. In this sense, subjectivisation has become institutionalised in the ongoing life of St Michael's. The most obvious foci of subjectivity are charismatic gifts, although I will take prayer first, as a practice taken up by a far greater proportion of the congregation.

Prayer

Within St Michael's, prayer is taught as central to the Christian life, and is practised with both frequency and enthusiasm by parishioners. Our questionnaire revealed that 79% of the congregation pray on a daily basis, a figure that is only 9.3% for the general British population (Jowell *et al*, 1999: 367). In response to a question about the degrees to which various practices are helpful "in your spiritual life", 'praying alone' was most popular. 66% claimed that praying alone was 'always helpful', a greater degree of support than that offered for sung worship, teaching in sermons and Bible study, whether alone or in groups. But group prayer is also regularly practised by the majority, some 69% claiming to practice this each week. Indeed, prayer is an integral part of all church practice, even within church meetings that have no apparent spiritual element, such as administrative meetings. It is expected that before every communal gathering, of whatever size and for whatever purpose, there will be prayer – spoken out-loud by an appointed leader, sometimes spoken by taking turns, and with bowed heads, and occasionally impromptu comments of "yes Lord", "thank-you Jesus" and "amen" from participants.

The general understanding of prayer among the congregation centres on the idea of a dialogue or conversation between the individual and God. As one parishioner put it, prayer is a two-way process, we speak and we listen. But there is also a widespread belief among the congregation that prayer is answered in real or material terms. Peter, who has been a member of St Michael's since the mid 1970s, sees prayer as ultimately futile if we do not believe that God can make a "real" difference. Moreover, prayer, for him, is an extension of the belief that God is actually present within the material world.

"...we should live in the supernatural. In other words, our God is real. Our God is alive. And we should let Him demonstrate that in the church...If you don't believe God can do anything, you don't pray to Him...but if you believe that God can make a difference, and God can do the things that are described in the New Testament, then you pray."

My ongoing interaction with the congregation revealed that prayer answers could be conceived in a number of different ways. For some, answers are encoded within some chance or mundane episode which would otherwise have been insignificant. For others, God speaks directly to them in private moments of prayer. Although the media of these answers are diverse, this is not conceived as a problem, but as a signal of God's pervasive activity within material reality. I have discussed a similar phenomenon above in terms of divine guidance, expressed in narrative form. Discourse about prayer functions in much the same way, though group prayer fosters a particular set of experiences, discussed as a feature of small group meetings in chapter seven. What distinguishes prayer in general is the way in which it becomes a ritual focus for the *validation of life decisions*.

I heard many accounts from individuals who felt that God had directly answered their prayer requests, whether in the form of guidance, material benefit or as an urging to

take a particular decision. Earlier on, I described Tom's account of his conversion, how his business had collapsed and how he had descended into moral decadence. After finally giving his life to Christ and becoming a Christian, he had prayed and felt God urging him to go into business again. One of the teenagers within the church was once giving a sermon about how he had come to be a youth group leader. He had been asked to contribute to the thriving youth work of the church, and first prayed "very hard" to see what God wanted him to do. After a period of prayer, he decided that God did want him to take up the work, and proceeded to accept the post. In these cases, prayer is reverted to in times of uncertainty, and subsequent decisions are given added credence in the eyes of fellow parishioners, by virtue of having been validated through divine intervention.

Reflection on the kinds of decisions that are made in response to divine guidance reveals an interesting variety. Some individuals appear to follow the most convenient or obviously appropriate route and attribute this to divine guidance. Others do the opposite, taking courses of action that go against practical sense or general expediency. Indeed, such 'impracticality' is often treated as a signal of following God rather than 'the world', the 'difficult path' consequently associated with moral virtue and a strong faith. As a 'model case', parishioners sometimes refer to David Watson's decision to take up the curacy of St Cuthbert's. On a practical, 'common sense' level, there was every reason to turn it down, but he prayed and followed God's guidance, with ultimately positive results. Prayer is assumed to reap a definite outcome, of a material, this-worldly nature, either as a consequence of obediently following God's guidance bestowed through prayer or even as a direct consequence of the act of prayer itself.

This was expressed in no uncertain terms around the time of the annual Gift Day, at which time members are encouraged to make an extra financial contribution to special causes. In November 1999, substantial extra funds were required for the renovation of the church hall. Revd Roger Simpson responded to this by organising a half evening of prayer, and encouraged the whole church to attend. During services, he mentioned the need to raise money as well as the amount required, but never directly asked parishioners to contribute. Addressing the congregation, he claimed “As long as we pray – don’t worry about the money, it’s there – all that God requires is that we pray and seek Him.” Although there is an obvious subtext here, and parishioners were certainly aware that a substantial financial gain was the desired result of the exercise, the overall emphasis was upon the need and power of prayer. Simpson consistently stressed the notion that collective prayer will bring about the desired material results, thus affirming a parity between spiritual practice and material consequence. When the desired amount was collected, the congregation at large were then able to attribute this blessing to the sound and committed prayer life of the church.

Prayer is used alongside personal narrative as a discursive device for the negotiation and expression of spiritually-infused subjectivity. It is a channel of communication between the divine and the human, the veracity and efficacy of which is demonstrated through narrative accounts. In this way the two media feed off one another, in providing the ritual basis and discursive expression of divine: human dialogue. The content of prayer and conception of its divine response is so broad that prayer serves an inclusivising function just as narrative does. It is a marker of inclusion in a complex ongoing relationship, participation in which is seen as a sign of one’s place among the faithful. It also has an empowering function, allowing individuals the

means to actively engage in the furtherance of their life goals with a sense of guidance and divine endorsement.

Charismatic Gifts

Within St Michael's, charismatic gifts take specific forms. While prophecy is accepted as authentic, and certain individuals are known for their 'prophetic status', phenomena referred to as 'prophecies' are rare in regular public meetings. More common are 'words of knowledge', a term used to refer to messages delivered to individuals from God, and then delivered in public for the benefit of the congregation. Similarly, while healing by the Holy Spirit – both physical and emotional - is accepted as a reality, it is not a regular occurrence. A time of 'ministry' is offered at the conclusion of each Sunday service, at which individuals could be prayed over, and these experiences could be conceived as healing, whether physical or emotional. Although significant, this phenomenon will not, however, be addressed here, primarily because of a lack of data. The other key manifestation of charismatic gifts is glossolalia, or tongue-speaking, which is practised both in church and in other contexts.

I will take both glossolalia and words of knowledge in turn, paying particular attention to the way in which subjective experience is invoked as religiously significant.

(1) Glossolalia

The phenomenon of speaking in tongues is, for many members, an experience that can arise in various social contexts. The vicar of St Michael's, Roger Simpson, even claims to speak in tongues whilst riding on his bicycle around York. Another, long-

standing parishioner spoke of having conversations with ‘the Lord’ whilst working in her kitchen, suggesting an intimacy of relationship that was akin to an ever-present companion or friend.

For most members, though, glossolalia appears to be primarily confined to the private sphere (cf. Cartledge, 1998). Indeed, the questionnaire survey suggests that the use of glossolalia in private is generally viewed more positively than its expression in the public arena of the church service. 24% claim that they often speak in tongues in church, while 40% say that they often speak in tongues privately. This solitary practice is seen by many as an aid to prayer, and is conceived in terms of a direct process of communication between the devotee and God. Moreover, private glossolalia is frequently described as a source of personal liberation. Its semantically reduced nature apparently brings about a momentary emancipation from the confinements of normal verbal discourse (Cox, 1996). Several parishioners claim to take solace in speaking in tongues when they do not know what else to say to God (Miller, 1997: 95). As one parishioner put it, “[it’s an] outpouring of your spirit but without knowing what words to use...”

Glossolalia is also a major element of worship, particularly within the popular evening service. Significantly, it is predominantly enveloped into the extended ‘blocks’ of sung worship. The tone of worship is relaxed, but exuberant, and the congregation throw themselves into the experience with an almost tangible enthusiasm. Indeed, this experience of worship – noted by many for its informality, intensity and abandon – elicits responses from many parishioners that are deeply emotional. Some can be seen to be weeping, others swaying with the rhythm of the music, many hold their hands

aloft in praise and others speak or sing in tongues. This set of responses is sometimes consciously triggered by the worship band, who will slow down the beat to a song and continue to play through the chords quietly and repetitively while the worship leader prompts the congregation with whispers of 'thank you Jesus' or of sung glossolalia. As the music intensifies in volume so the congregation will respond with even more emotional intensity and a dulled murmur will grow into an emotional rapture of numerous voices, until it crescendos into a repeat chorus of the original song.

What is most interesting about this kind of glossolalia is that whilst clearly public, it is also strangely private. Those parishioners who practise it within church services appear to be absorbed into the anonymity of the congregation. In fact, glossolalia is so enveloped into the experience of sung worship that at first, I failed to notice it. It was only after hearing reports to the contrary and then discovering over time what it was that I should look for, that I realised that speaking in tongues was actually taking place.

I would suggest that the corporate expression of sung worship is used by many as a favoured context for speaking in tongues partly *because* of the anonymity that this experience allows. Public performance of glossolalia as a solitary act before others is extremely rare in any context, and spontaneous expressions which are 'Spirit-led' are notable for their performance *during* sung worship, rather than at any other points in the service. Furthermore, when questioned on the nature of glossolalia, members are more likely to treat it as a medium for worship than as a source of divine knowledge or wisdom, and as primarily voluntary rather than involuntary. As with private prayer, it is treated as a form of communication with God, whether as praise or petition, rather

than as a message from God through the individual for the benefit of others. In the charismatic tradition, substantive messages have traditionally been extracted from episodes of tongues through the medium of interpretation. However, this is not often practised within the worship meetings of St Michael's. Glossolalia remains for the most part a personal act, engaged in without expectation of human response and without any necessary substantive meaning.

Some commentators have focussed on the generation of charisma out of the power of the group, interpreting glossolalia in terms of a Durkheimian effervescence (McGuire, 1982). Csordas describes 'loud praise' – i.e. impassioned sung worship - as having a "life of its own", "in which the reality of the collectivity becomes more vivid than the reality of individual members." (Csordas, 1997: 110) Within St Michael's it is both the power but also the anonymity of the group that appears to draw individuals to engage in tongue-speaking during sung worship. There is certainly a sense of being caught up in the collective experience, but also a notable lack of performance – individuals throw themselves into worship, but without the kind of dramatic behaviour which might set them apart from their peers. In this sense glossolalia is not so much 'privatised' as immersed in anonymity, collective rather than performed with an audience, and is expressed as worship rather than inter-personal politics. Explanations for this trend must refer to the recent history of the church, and to an increasing discomfort with charismatic performance, addressed later on in this chapter.

(2) Words of Knowledge

In contrast with glossolalia, 'words of knowledge' are performed exclusively before an audience, as their very value rests on their significance for an external party.

‘Words of knowledge’ were a common feature at the St Michael’s evening service during my time with the community. Usually towards the end of the evening, the service leader would approach the lectern and ask the congregation if anyone “feels that God is saying anything to them” that they would like to share with the rest of the congregation. This would usually elicit responses from three or four parishioners. Each would walk to the front of the church and address the congregation at the lectern, before returning to their seat, and then another parishioner would rise to take their turn.

These speeches varied in length, content and style of delivery. All were confided to the service leader before being delivered to the congregation, as a means of checking their suitability and, presumably, their theological soundness. When I asked Roger Simpson about this process, he supported the need for authority on these occasions, saying that it was always useful to know a person’s character, to know that they’re not ‘loopy’, or living in sin. This process acted as a subtle form of policing and ensured that no radical or ‘heretical’ messages were delivered before the congregation. As such, it could be conceived as a means of social control, and as a way for leaders to exert their authority over the performance of gifts and over the communal worship process in general (Percy, 1996: 24-5). As argued in chapter four, the public discourse of the congregation, while apparently relaxed and inclusive, is actually tightly ordered.

It is possible to classify the various ‘words of knowledge’ speeches that I heard during my fieldwork according to factors of source, audience and purpose of message. Some speeches were clearly composed out of the imaginative resources of the individual speaker, some of which were based on a central image which was then interpreted in

terms of a specific message for the congregation. Others had a more discursive basis and were either based on, or were entirely composed of, a reading from a written work deemed to be of some spiritual value. In these cases, although speakers would not claim that the text itself was given to them by God, a common interpretation would be that God guided them to that particular reading.

The intended audience of words of knowledge varied between a message that was couched in terms of the congregation as a whole – it was valid for everyone present – to those which were aimed at particular individuals. In a case of the latter, individuals were never named, but aspects of their person or station in life would be cited, so that recognition was at least potentially possible by the person in question, or by those closest to them.

‘Words of knowledge’ appeared to be employed for five main purposes: as a call to action by parishioners, as a solution to a proposed problem, as a report of God’s miraculous work, as a means of reassurance, and for predictions about future events. Parishioners deployed this charismatic medium as a way of affirming their own concerns and spiritual identities, but also as a channel through which to deal with inter-personal issues.

I have analysed a sample of sixteen different words of knowledge, all of which were witnessed by me personally whilst in the field. All took place towards the end of an evening service, and all but two were spoken by the recipients of the message personally. As I witnessed these incidents, it struck me that a great variety of people would offer words of knowledge. They were delivered sombrelly, and although often

with enthusiasm, rarely with an open display of emotion. The congregation would quietly listen as these speeches took place, and the service leader would often respond by encouraging us all to “weigh these words carefully”, i.e. reflect on their significance for our own lives.

Out of respect for those present, I did not make notes on words of knowledge in church, but scribbled down whatever I could as soon as possible after the service. This means that my descriptions are not always thorough, although most are fairly detailed, and I was able to classify them according to the following framework. The majority of speeches were discursively improvised, focussed on the general congregation, and had the ostensive purpose of providing reassurance or comfort for the parishioners present.

This system of classification is expressed in tabular form below.

SOURCE	AUDIENCE	PURPOSE OF MESSAGE
Image-based (2)	General (13)	Call to action (3)
Discursively improvised (11)	Specific (individual or group) (3)	Advice concerning a specific problem (2)
Drawn from external text (3)		Report of God’s miraculous work (1)
		Means of reassurance/comfort (7)
		Prediction (3)

Table Five: The classification of ‘words of knowledge’ occurring at evening services at St Michael-le-Belfrey.

The other major issue which unites most of these examples is that they deal with life issues, i.e. with the everyday experiences of individual members of the congregation.

They are focussed, either directly or indirectly, on the personal activities of parishioners. Consideration of three examples in detail will shed light on how the medium of the word of knowledge is used as a way of working through personal issues in this sense. Three very different examples have been chosen, in order that the diversity of this medium be properly explored.

Example #1:

A middle aged woman approaches the lectern. She says that the Lord gave her a “burden”, and that she used to suffer from depression. However, He wonderfully healed her, so she wants to “shout to the Lord”, just like in the song we have just sung. He is a “loving, gracious God, who understands exactly where you are and is able to seat you in heavenly places.” She says that she had six electric shock treatments, but nothing seemed to cure her. Then God healed her. Someone in the congregation shouts “Hallelujah!” and a round of applause breaks out.

This is a classic example of an individual bringing a set of experiences to the context of the worship event, and then setting them within a theological framework before the congregation. The woman speaking emphasises how God’s power cured where human science failed, thus offering evidential proof of His active power in the contemporary world. The account is also expressed in semi-poetic form – God is “able to seat you in heavenly places”. This conveys a sense of legitimacy and authority by way of a stylistic parity with Biblical language. In this way, the speaker may experience a sense of empowerment on two levels: both from the opportunity to speak authoritatively to the congregation, and from invoking scriptural language which invests her message with additional status. The public platform achieved in the delivery of ‘words of

knowledge' makes this empowerment possible, and as the speaker achieves authority in the eyes of the congregation, so the congregation itself is offered renewed evidence of God's work.

Example #2

A woman in her forties addresses the congregation, and reads out her message, which is based around an image God has given to her. She describes a sea, onto which a carafe of oil is poured. She interprets this as God telling us about the way the church is to be transformed, from something that is difficult to get inside – like the carafe – to something that is flexible and which develops with the context in which it is situated. Just as the oil blends and moves with the sea, so we must adapt to our own material circumstances in order that the church perform its function in bringing in more believers.

The woman here is known throughout the congregation as a prophetess, due to the vivid and poignant messages she often delivers in church services, home group gatherings and prayer meetings. She reads out the message, suggesting that this is an image she has received in a different context. The written medium also allows her speech a certain eloquence of expression, and her actual speech was indeed visually striking. As with the above example, her message has no specific intended audience, but is assumed to be relevant for all. By contrast with the first speech, however, this one has a normative message: there appears to be a call to action on the part of the church as a whole. The visual imagery carries with it a certain vagueness of intention; she could be urging for cultural adaptation, for increased missionary activity, or for radical changes in worship, although she does explicitly affirm the priority of

evangelism. One reading of the image could be an endorsement of the tempered enculturation described in chapter three. That is, the church is called to adapt to its cultural surroundings, not in order to have more meaning but as a means of attracting the unchurched.

Words of knowledge' were often couched in terms that could suggest at best equivocal, and sometimes even multivalent messages. The consequence of this, of course, is that a broader array of people may then perceive some personal meaning in the message. Moreover, the more vague the message, the more difficult it is to contest or challenge its content. Never, during my fieldwork, did I hear 'words of knowledge' that were so specific in detail as to be amenable to falsification. A vagueness of language is thereby used to protect the integrity of the tradition, and also to affirm a sense of divine mystery.

Example #3

Towards the end of the service, the service leader, a man in his seventies, approaches the lectern. He tells us of two instances of God speaking to people in St Michael's. He does not give names, but reports what they have said to him, and responds with advice. The first is about someone who does not like making decisions; his advice is that we all have to make difficult decisions in life, and that this person must also do so. The second is about someone who is worried that on becoming a member of St Michael's, they will be swamped by its huge body. He responds to this by saying that this huge body is made up of lots of little bodies, and that they all have a part to play.

This is a rare example of messages being delivered through the service leader, rather than by the recipients themselves. It is unclear on this occasion whether the advice offered is that of the service leader or that it is meant to stand as part of the original message. However, the first is more likely, for two reasons. First, the service leader in question is a well-known charismatic and often delivers his own messages in the first person – i.e. invoking God's voice as his own. Second, his advice is clearly improvised – his delivery, in an attempt to use poetic language, was often stumbled, suggesting that he was composing the speech there and then.

This example differs from the earlier two in that specific individuals form the focus of the message. The issues dealt with are of a practical, inter-personal nature and are easily met with advice and proposed solutions. The fact that these solutions are delivered through the medium of a 'word of knowledge' gives them an added credence by virtue of them being divinely ordained. Moreover, these problems are thereby introduced into the public realm, and are announced as issues for the church as a whole to consider. They are sufficiently general to apply to many of those present in the church, and the leader's advice serves as a means of reassurance whilst avoiding the discomfort of personal confrontations. In this way inter-personal problems are dealt with on a public, but non-confrontational level; all are audience to the discourse, yet no public response is expected of any parishioner.

The 'Turn to Life'

While often viewed as spontaneous and emerging from an immediacy of religious experience, words of knowledge here reveal how the charismatic proceeds according to specific rules of conduct (Irvine, 1982). Explicitly imposed by the vicar through a

system of vetting contributions (see above), regularities are also observed implicitly in terms of the topics chosen by individuals for presentation to the congregation. In my field notes, after observing several week's worth of words of knowledge at the evening service, I wrote down my impressions:

"...the language used is often poetic, using specific formulae, and following certain themes rather than others, e.g. they nearly always involve some sense of reassurance of God's presence/action/blessing /etc, aimed at those who may feel lost or alienated, or who are suffering. It is as though a problem is assumed, and an answer is called for, is required. The difficulties of life and of the Christian path, perhaps, are the starting point for most, if not all, of these speeches." (field-notes, 13/2/00)

This pattern is depicted in table five: speeches tend to focus on offering reassurance and comfort to the marginalised and celebrating God's work amidst the lives of individuals, rather than on prediction or a call to revival. In other words, they are oriented inwards, to the life of the congregation, and to the personal and inter-personal lives of its members. It is the immediate and the familiar that is sacralised and endowed with most significance. In this way, religion experiences a 'turn to life' (Simmel, 1997), as the subjective concerns of individuals become the public focus of the congregation. What is most noteworthy is that nevertheless, individuals are not named, nor called to the front – indeed, exposure of any kind is avoided, a by-product of which is the vague, inclusive language deployed in these speeches. As a consequence of this, specific concerns are aired as general subjective experiences – feeling lost, a sense of being without purpose, being scared of commitment - which may then apply to the congregation as a whole. In a vague and general way, words of

knowledge channel the expression and resolution of existential problems associated with the difficulties of sustaining a life of faith.

I was not privy to any information about how words of knowledge were ‘followed up’ by church leaders, so it is difficult to ascertain the efficacy of this medium as a problem-solving device. Most obviously, words of knowledge appeared to tackle problems through offering general advice and wisdom. In this way, they may have been more empowering for those that spoke them than they were helpful to those they were targeted at.

The preoccupation with internal, subjective issues very much reflects the trend across contemporary charismatic Christianity to focus on that which is life-affirming, stressing vitality, the interpersonal and the immediate. In St Michael’s, this is expressed through its preference for exuberant, Vineyard style sung worship. Favourite choruses – *I Will Be Yours*, John Wimber’s *Isn’t He Wonderful* and *You’re Beautiful Beyond Description* – all have romantic overtones and celebrate a personal intimacy with God. The majority of the congregation believe in the Kingdom of God as something that is “here and now in the life of the church”, rather than associated with a future, spectacular event. Most strikingly, there is virtually no attention in church teaching given to death or the after life, an omission reflected in diverse questionnaire responses to these subjects. Rather than focus on issues of a lofty theological kind, the congregation appear more concerned with issues of a this-worldly nature (Luckmann, 1967: 114). Words of knowledge allow this concern to draw in subjective concerns, fostering a pastoral negotiation of existential problems for the benefit of the congregation.

Summary

I have examined the invocation of and appeal to subjectivity through four media: personal narratives, prayer, glossolalia and words of knowledge. While diverse in the discursive forms they take, they embody similar themes in their expression within the culture of St Michael's. All imply the this-worldly presence of God, and all (apart from glossolalia) are preoccupied with mundane, everyday or inter-personal issues rather than with other worldly realms. There is little reference to abstract or scriptural truth, or to prophetic messages which carry a global significance. Their focus chiefly falls upon issues of a personal or inter-personal relevance to the congregation.

Public charismatic rituals also follow particular patterns. Many authors have noted the ways in which charismatic gifts have been used to impose power over others within religious groups (e.g. Calley, 1965; Percy, 1996). Within St Michael's, rather than offer opportunities for the obvious invocation and imposition of power, public rituals actually circumvent episodes of confrontation. Glossolalia is largely privatised and rarely interpreted into an authoritative message. Words of knowledge do not tend to adopt an imperative voice, and messages are generally affirming and supportive rather than instructive or judgmental. However, expression of charismatic experience is clearly ordered, not least *via* the control of public utterance by the service leader. In this way, while charismata are not used to impose power over individuals as such (cf. Percy, 1996), the public discourse exerts power by controlling how the 'Spirit speaks'.

But how are these ritual and non-ritual phenomena related? In order to answer this question it is necessary to examine what theories of ritual practice have to say about the relationship between ritual and everyday conduct.

The Ritualisation of Life

In his classic volume *The Invisible Religion*, Thomas Luckmann makes the following comment about religious rituals:

“Their purpose refers directly to the sacred cosmos. Sacrifices, rites of passage, burial rites, and such like represent ultimate significance *without what we may term intermediate levels of translation into the profane context of everyday routine.*”

(Luckmann, 1967: 59, my emphasis)

Luckmann clearly separates out rituals from the everyday routines of social life. Indeed, he may be read as implying that their validity derives from this radical separation. What I have discovered within St Michael’s is something quite different. Rather, there appears to be a cross fertilisation between ‘ritualised’ actions such as prayer and ‘words of knowledge’, and the everyday world, through subjectively constructed narratives. I would argue that the media discussed above – personal narratives, prayer, glossolalia, words of knowledge - feed upon one another as they are variously drawn upon in the ongoing faith lives of individual parishioners. Ritual is not radically separated from everyday life. Rather, the two are mutually constitutive and, as such, embody common themes.

This phenomenon can be better understood with reference to the work of Thomas J. Csordas (1997), who has studied the rituals of Catholic Charismatics in the USA. Csordas noticed how embodied techniques learnt through ritual are not simply shut off once the believer leaves the ritual context. Rather, ‘ritualised’ actions seep into the structures of everyday conduct. To make sense of this process, Csordas coins the term, the “ritualization of life”, the process whereby the boundaries between sacred and everyday activity are effectively dissolved (Csordas, 1997: 100f; see Coleman and Collins, 2000). Within charismatic churches, this process is made possible largely because of a pervasive emphasis upon subjectivity, upon the construction of subjective

narratives in response to experiences of the divine. Just as the words of knowledge and personal narratives described above are believed to have the same source, so they are also constructed in a similar fashion, and serve as complementary resources in the ongoing development of individual spiritual identities.

A key mediating factor in this process is language. Whether through well-used exclamations of praise (“hallelujah”, “thankyou Jesus”), episodes of glossolalia, or the use of accepted charismatic argot, language serves as a vehicle for the dissemination of ritual experiences into the everyday realm, and back again (Coleman and Collins, 2000: 323). Congregants pray or speak in tongues whilst walking through town. Parishioners share stories of how God has answered their prayers over coffee in the church hall. Words of knowledge are delivered in church before being discussed in the pub by inspired attendees. Language serves as the medium through which subjective experience is both expressed, shared and infused into the interactive culture of the congregation.

Within St Michael’s, the ‘ritualisation of life’ is made easier by the domestication of certain types of charismatic experience. In particular, within the context of congregational discourse, there is little phenomenological disparity between words of knowledge and regular conversation between members. As the church has de-emphasised the emotional, performative and dramatic in charismatic possession, so episodes of charismata have become more discursive and more focussed on the subjective struggles of faith. They have become domesticated in shedding the spectacular, and domesticated in nurturing a concern with the subjective identities of members. As such they are concerned with the problems of individuals, but

individuals caught up in the same set of problems: how to find meaning, hold onto security, make commitments and have the strength to live up to them. And while charismata generally fail to elicit a general set of principles with which to resolve these issues, the ritualisation of life ensures that members are asking questions together, and sharing the resources of an interconnected experience.

In this respect, an embrace of the subjective as spiritually significant has not automatically generated a fragmentation of the congregation, a correlation some authors imply as inevitable. Rather, while in some respect encouraging a diversification of spiritual identities, the ritualisation of life also allows the emergence of *shared* patterns of priority, substantively expressed as the affirmation of life, of sound relationships and of a healthy and unified community.

Cynicism Towards the Charismatic

Although a charismatic spirituality is embraced by a great many congregants, there are also hints of cynicism among a significant number. Particularly, the use of charismatic gifts in church is clearly not something altogether embraced by all. As part of my questionnaire survey, I asked parishioners how they felt about the use of charismatic gifts in church. While 37% felt they were an “essential part of worship”, the majority – 58% - felt that, while they are helpful for some, they are unhelpful for others.

During fieldwork, I met many individuals who did not appear to engage in charismatic worship at all. They did not speak in tongues, offer words of knowledge, or even engage in sung worship in a fashion consonant with the impassioned charismatic style. Questionnaire results suggested that, within St Michael’s, these individuals constituted

a significant minority. 49% had never spoken in tongues in church. 40% had never done so privately. 36% had never received a 'word of knowledge'. Most strikingly, when asked to align themselves with a particular Christian label, while the largest group preferred 'charismatic evangelical', they were still in an overall minority (37%).

Questionnaire data provides some clues as to what kind of parishioner is most likely to adopt this more tentative position. Those calling themselves 'Anglicans' are just as likely as 'evangelicals' to support the essential role of charismatic gifts in church. Unsurprisingly, those calling themselves 'charismatic evangelical' are much more likely to do so – 67% of this group seeing them as 'essential'. Cross-tabulation of data does not reveal significant differences among those claiming different Christian labels and their charismatic practice. However, the likelihood that an individual is a regular recipient of words of knowledge is directly related, with Anglicans least likely to have received a 'word', evangelicals more likely, and charismatic evangelicals more likely still, with 75% of that sub-grouping claiming to have received a word of knowledge often or at least a few times. It is therefore words of knowledge which most clearly divide charismatics from non-charismatics, the latter equally likely to engage or abstain from glossolalia, ministry prayer or episodes of healing as their charismatic peers. These norms of charismatic practice are defused throughout the congregation; it is its most performative, oratory medium which is treated with more caution.

But the analysis also reveals an interesting set of generational differences, chiefly to do with the differences between the youngest age group (19-29) and the middle age group (30-59). While the figures are inconclusive, the middle age group appears most likely to embrace the charismatic evangelical label. Parishioners in the younger group

are significantly less likely to have been ‘born again’ than the middle group (13% rather than 53% of their age group). Conversely, the young are more likely to express a more gradual, steady understanding of conversion than the middle group (88% rather than 47%). There are differences in attitudes to charismatic gifts which may be related. Only 7% of the young group see charismatic gifts in church as “essential”, while 93% see them as optional or helpful for some, but not for others. The opposite trend applies to the middle group: 58% see charismatic gifts as essential and 42% see them as optional. The middle group are also more likely to believe in the devil as a “personal being” than the younger group (91% versus 63%). Although further analysis of a larger sample of the congregation would be required for a more precise picture of the charismatic/non-charismatic divide, the available evidence suggests that it is the middle age group rather than the younger one who are most likely to claim to be ‘charismatic’ and embrace the beliefs and practices associated with this idea. Figures for the older (60+) group are much more evenly spread and do not diverge significantly from patterns across the entire congregation.

One possible explanation of these trends is that those only old enough to have had adult experience of the charismatic movement in the 1990s are more disillusioned and less trusting of its spiritual practices. Additionally, they may have less faith in the ideological associations of the more ‘intense’ aspects of the movement, including being ‘born again’ and the notion of spiritual warfare. One could additionally argue that they see gifts as a resource rather than a necessity, in reflection of a recent ‘levelling’ of the charismatic (Walker, 1997), and of orientations towards religious phenomena in general (Beckford, 1989). By contrast, parishioners in their 30s, 40s or 50s root their perceptions of gifts in experiences further back in time than the heyday

of John Wimber or the Toronto Blessing. As such, their convictions are less dependent upon these turbulent and disorienting developments, and are thus less shaken by their passing. In so far as these shifts may be associated with a broadening of the charismatic evangelical worldview, then they may be seen as a liberalising trend among the younger generations (Hunter, 1987).

My extensive interaction with St Michael's members suggested that any underlying suspicion of the charismatic was not allowed to disrupt the charismatic discourse discussed earlier. Individuals still speak of God's work in their lives, of rewards and blessings and of the material answers to prayer, even while critical of the public exercise of gifts. It is not the supernaturalist worldview which is seen as problematic, but its application in public contexts. Conversations in the field suggested that individuals were tentative about the charismatic because of its emotional intensity and propensity to hysteria. Others see a potential for power abuse – authority invested in the subjective resources of the individual removes lines of accountability and allows irresponsible discipling. Most clearly, it is the 'regulatedness' of human emotion which is the focus of most suspicion.

To expand, Mestrovic argues that the process of rationalisation in modernity has been extended to include expressions of emotion. Emotional episodes are apprehended as "bite-sized, pre-packed" and "rationally manufactured" (Mestrovic, 1997: xi). A consequence of this process is that such episodes are often viewed with suspicion, being seen as inauthentic, and are thus kept at a distance by more cynical observers. This tallies well with cynical comments from St Michael's parishioners about the charismatic amounting to "spirituality on tap". One long-standing member

remembered the influence of John Wimber: "...you're touched on the head, and bang! You receive the Holy Spirit and it's all happening." This immediacy, along with a sense of the routinisation of revival, arguably inevitable in a long-standing charismatic church, has worn thin with members, who have put aside "emotional hype" for a more discursive, intellectual faith. One parishioner put it this way,

"I'm not particularly into experience because I don't trust it. I'm much more of a head person...I know it's helpful to some people and I'm not gonna say it shouldn't happen but I don't find it very useful. I find it more useful to be able to sit down and talk about things...and more credible to think that God works through our own minds and through our own decision making processes and our own trains of thought..."

While modernity is commonly associated with a suspicion towards institutions (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974; Heelas, Lash and Morris, 1996), in St Michael's it is *institutionalised emotional excess* which is viewed with suspicion and as a sign of inauthentic subjective expression. It is its supposed spontaneity, and yet ultimately consistent forms which undermines the credibility of charismatic possession. This 'post-emotional' response is not merely to do with broader processes of modernisation – indeed, it counts against Berger's claims about the under-institutionalised subjective sphere (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974). Rather, this is also a further aspect of the backlash against the intensification of the charismatic in the early 1990s, and is therefore bound up in specifics of local church history. Moreover, the fact that disillusioned parishioners remain within St Michael's is a testimony to how the church has subsequently broadened its approach to spirituality.

We might further argue that a suspicion towards potential power abuse and alienation has been pervasive enough to shape the way that charismatic gifts are practised. Recalling the descriptions offered above, glossolalia is largely privatised and words of

knowledge affirm rather than challenge the congregation. Moreover, conceptions of prayer and experience of God are subject to personal acts of verification rather than the legitimisation of leaders. As a medium of power, the charismatic has been ‘softened’ – or perhaps blunted – so that the predominant appropriation of experience favours the enhancement of spiritual lives rather than the imposition of power over others.

SUMMARY

Subjectivisation, the turn towards non-institutional, self-focussed resources, is a pervasive and influential trend among the St Michael’s congregation. It finds expression in shared narratives and stories of experiencing the divine, as well as in public rituals associated with charismatic gifts. Like the liberalisation trend discussed in chapter three, subjectivisation opens up the symbolic boundaries of the congregation. Descriptions of spiritual experiences among members display a great diversity and even a tendency towards idiosyncrasy. This appears to support Peter Berger’s claim that a reliance upon the subjective serves as a precarious authority, and is insufficient as a framework of shared meaning (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974).

But at the same time, these subjective expressions of identity do not display the fragmentation and individualism that one might associate with a ‘spiritual homelessness’. Indeed, subjective narratives appear to draw members together rather than divide them. The flexibility afforded by subjectivity within these media draw the diverse factions of the congregation together as they are all able to participate in what they perceive to be a common narrative. Moreover, the ‘ritualisation of life’ described above allows this narrative to be infused into public, communal contexts and hence

generate opportunities for empowerment and the enhancement of community cohesion. Even those who are cynical about the charismatic do not tend to undermine the worldview which grounds these experiences.

In this way, subjectivity serves as a simultaneously diversifying and unifying force. It diversifies belief by endorsing an essentially individualistic basis of Christian identity. It unifies the congregation by channelling its expression through media that are only offered within its boundaries, and through fostering opportunities for the cross fertilisation of narrative traditions. In embracing an essentially inclusivist notion of experience, the congregation show signs of capitulating to the diversity of its membership. But unlike more textually based teachings, the malleability of subjectivity means that experience is more easily sustained as a central authority for the community.

CHAPTER SIX

INNOVATIONS AT THE MARGINS: IDENTITY AND PROGRESSION IN *VISIONS*

“The vision is that we may in time become a genuine catalyst for the wider church to lose some of its archaic clutter and become more accessible to the larger part of the unchurched population who find church so dead.” (*Visions*, internal document, 1994)

“Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins.” (Douglas, 1966: 122)

Introduction

I have examined the ways in which the St Michael’s congregation have embraced the modern trends of liberalisation and subjectivisation. The boundaries of tradition have been broadened as internal diversity is increasingly accepted as the norm and personal differences are dismissed as cosmetic rather than divisive. Roger Simpson’s sermon, summarised in chapter one, urged Christians to be set apart from the world and resist the temptations of modern life. And yet we have found evidence of a serious capitulation to secular modernity in attitudinal trends among parishioners. Science and rational thought are apparently placed before the scriptures in many respects. There are indications of a tolerance towards other religions that reflects wider social norms rather than evangelical history. Attitudes towards women are liberal rather than traditionalist. Understandings of the spiritual dimension of life reflect the language of the New Age rather than the Bible. While public rhetoric endorses the ‘culture war’ (Hunter, 1991), views on the ground imply a mingling of perspectives.

The church has, for the most part, absorbed these trends unwittingly; parishioners would deny that any significant degree of compromise *in beliefs* has taken place. As David Bebbington has observed, evangelicals have always maintained that they embody an immovable, timeless tradition of truth even during periods of radical change (Bebbington, 1989: 271). And yet, St Michael’s has also been motivated by a need, recognised and supported by its parishioners, to be culturally relevant. In this

sense it has embraced change and accommodation, although it has always insisted – *post hoc* - that such changes are either peripheral to the doctrinal core, or else a matter of medium rather than message (Luckmann, 1967: 83).

The developments represented by the *Visions* group are quite different. My account of the ‘Leaps of Faith’ service in chapter one depicts a radical reconfiguration of worship media. Pews are replaced by bean bags, the Bible is replaced by word loops, sermons are ousted and movie clips appear in their place. Music is loud, partly instrumental and draws from the popular styles of the dance culture. The predominance of words in St Michael’s – both spoken and written – is supplanted by a menagerie of images in *Visions*. Such a drastic overhaul of the evangelical worship tradition signals a radical engagement with contemporary culture, following Tomlinson (1995) into the realms of post-modern change.

But what are the consequences of these changes for shared belief within the group? The deregulation which drives the aesthetics of worship – drawing from resources with a Christian, secular or alternative-spiritual flavour – is suggestive of a radical challenge to tradition. The group’s orientation to outsiders, described in chapter one, also implies a significant re-ordering of boundaries characterised by a pastoral and possibly theological inclusivism. Just what counts as legitimate and who counts as included are issues which are simultaneously questioned and undermined by the culture of the group. The public worship of *Visions* is heavily resonant with post-modern notions of *bricolage*, experimentalism and detraditionalisation. But do the attitudes and beliefs of members reflect the individualism and almost indulgent liberalism associated with these processes? In this sense, do they represent a

reconfiguration of evangelicalism which is ‘hyper-modern’, taking the processes of liberalisation and subjectivisation to a further extreme than their parent church?

It is the purpose of this chapter to address the ways in which the *Visions* group have engaged with modernity and forged for themselves a fresh portrayal of Christian tradition. As the culture of the group is best conceived in terms of a process - *the reconfiguration of charismatic evangelicalism* - I will adopt a dynamic approach, focussing on dimensions of change rather than on their value structure as a static phenomenon. I will describe the emergence and history of the group, before examining how the shared values of members signal a specific pattern of reconfiguration. I will then explore how *Visions* differs from St Michael’s, in order to draw out differences of direction and emphasis, and examine the impact that these have upon relationships between the two groups.

Warehouse: The History and Development of a Project in Friendship Evangelism

“One [year] a whole bunch of people came back from Greenbelt...They came back fired up with this [idea]...saying, *there ought to be more to church than this*. Now, [at this time]...I think we must be talking about the mid 80s...I think St Mike’s had lost its direction...I think there was a touch of disillusionment, and small group wasn’t doing very much – certainly wasn’t doing anything for us... and we agreed that we wouldn’t mind having a meeting that was more academically oriented, more liberal in its stance towards what could be discussed...in the sense of less dictated...by the church...and we wanted to have an open board, and to discuss things working out from first principles...So it became a little bit of a hot house of thinking, and we talked about all sorts of things, and we argued the nights away...”

This was how Daniel Green, one of the founder members of *Visions*, described the birth of the group, charting a sense of disillusionment with the church, a need to work things out again from first principles, a need to broaden one’s conception of what was possible and what was legitimate. The Monday Night Group emerged as an alternative home group of St Michael-le-Belfrey. It was built on a need for change, but had no

firm set of objectives. Its only guiding principles consisted in the need for discussion - rigorous, intellectual discussion – and an embrace of the post-modern as a model of contemporary culture.

In 1989, after years of discussion, and inspired by NOS, members of the group decided to establish a local event for evangelism – ‘The Warehouse Project’ – which would bridge the cultural barrier between the church and youth culture. The event was based around the idea of a Christian nightclub, and Green negotiated access to a disused warehouse which would serve as a venue. The event took place in July of that year, was staffed by over one hundred organisers and attracted over 1200 people over two weeks. Around fifteen local churches took part, and various activities were held both in the warehouse building, and out on the streets of York. Music was provided by local Christian and non-Christian bands, theatre and sketches were performed, and discussion groups explored topical religious and moral issues.

‘Warehouse’ was driven by the philosophy of ‘friendship’ evangelism (see chapter two; Ward 1995; 1997; Roberts, 1999: 12), emphasising a need to minimise cultural distance between the church and non-Christians, and a need to express Christian values in action over and above verbal proclamation. In this way, the Christian life is embodied within actions and contexts that have meaning and value to one’s ‘evangelistic audience’. As Daniel Green explains,

“...You get alongside people, you live where they’re at, you earn the right by demonstration to speak in their lives...But you also give them something, you give them something they need – a space to be, in this particular case. I think it’s based on fundamentally Biblical principles – you look at Jesus...feeding the 5, 000 – he didn’t just preach at them, he gave them something they needed. I think the concept of holding a meeting in a building that people don’t normally go into, in a style that

they're not used to, that is culturally alien, is somehow the wrong way to go about doing evangelism, as far as I'm concerned."

In reflection of the philosophy of 'friendship' evangelism, Green and his colleagues affirmed the value of listening to people over talking at them, questioning the model of evangelism that leads to conversion "at all costs". Understanding and practical support were offered irrespective of response, these things extended to those in need whether they accepted the Christian faith or not (Ward, 1995: 28-9). According to this model, the starting point for the evangelistic project is not an authoritative presentation of the Gospel message. Rather, it is, as Green puts it, the culture and needs of those who are "heading for the cliff edge".

Following the success of the 'Warehouse' event, several of those who were involved in its organisation arranged to meet in order to discuss the possibilities of a long term project, based on the same principles. After two years of further heated discussion, this group decided to establish itself as *Warehouse*, a separate 'alternative' service initiative attached to St Michael-le-Belfrey. Remaining a firm advocate of an 'incarnational mission' (Bosch, 1991), Graham Cray encouraged the group to entrench themselves in the culture of the night-clubbers. On the grounds of the spirituality and utopian imagery inherent in the dance culture, Cray felt that the clubbers were particularly winnable for Christ. The *Warehouse* group began to take regular visits to Leeds, in which the rave subculture was thriving. By attending night-clubs and chatting to night-clubbers, the group's aim was to 'cross the bridge' into this culture and thereby develop a mission outlook that was culturally authentic in the eyes of their non-Christian peers.

In emulation of NOS, which several members were still attending on an occasional basis (Howard, 1995: 50), the group split into several small committees. A finance group was established and a group bank account opened, *Warehouse* being funded by voluntary contributions from its members. An 'images group' was set up to oversee the development of service resources: slides, video and material artwork. A social action group focussed on helping with the local homeless, and giving to the poor, and a steering group oversaw the general direction and organisation of *Warehouse* as a whole. Daniel Green acted as pastor and effective leader of the group. Commitment to the group, both in terms of practical assistance and in moral and intellectual support, was stressed as essential. Members were placed in one of the working groups according to their skills, and expected to regularly attend weekly meetings, practice services and the home group session. At this stage, the group was still small, but had a committed core membership of around twenty, a figure that was to become established as a peak in its history.

After a long period of rigorous planning, the *Warehouse* group held its first service in May, 1992. Although the service exploited a great deal of technology in comparison with the services of its parent church – video, slide projections, dimmed lighting, dance music – it still retained elements of a traditional charismatic evangelical worship event. Its basic structure was centred on a block of sung worship, a block of teaching by way of a sermon, followed by a 'ministry time', during which participants prayed over each other, calling upon the power of the Holy Spirit.

From then on the services were held on a more regular basis, first each month, then twice monthly. *Warehouse* soon won a national reputation for itself as a centre of

innovative worship. The group became known as one of the first established UK ‘alternative’ service groups, and became respected both locally and nationally for its use of technology and art in worship events. *Warehouse* also achieved credibility on the northern secular night-club circuit, for the visual images they would provide at regular club nights. These ‘gigs’ were perceived as natural contexts for friendship evangelism, and although the group now look back with humour on how few people they actually ‘converted’ to Christianity, they pride themselves on the positive feedback they received from non-Christian clubbers, especially on the visuals which “made them think”.

Warehouse played an integral part in the organisation of the alt.worship event held in Lambeth Palace in 1995, following the collapse of NOS (Roberts, 1999: 12). The downfall of the Sheffield group came as a shock to some members of *Warehouse*, who had friends in NOS who had suffered under the manipulation and oppression of its leadership. However, the group as a whole did not suffer. In fact, the extent to which NOS had effectively distanced them from its leadership structure forced the group to develop independently with ideas and resources of its own (Roberts, 1999). But *Warehouse* still experienced problems fending off prejudice from mainstream evangelicals (both within St Michael’s and outside of it) who assumed the corruption of NOS was also rife in its many imitators.

Ever since NOS performed its infamous ‘Passion in Global Chaos’ set in 1992, the Greenbelt festival has been a major context for the promotion and development of alternative worship. *Warehouse* performed there on several occasions, organising contemplative prayer, dance and sung worship. National prestige has also been

fostered by appearances at major alternative worship conferences in London and York, and at groundbreaking worship events such as *Rave in the Nave* and *Time of Our Lives*. These events have helped to forge connections with other alternative worship groups, and as the alt.worship network has expanded and consolidated its identity, both through communal gatherings and in virtual space on the internet and in email discussion, *Warehouse* have remained one of the pioneering voices of the movement.

Current Directions: From Friendship Evangelism to Post-Evangelicalism

I first encountered the group in December, 1998, when they were in their seventh year of existence. They had changed their name to *Visions* two years earlier, in reflection of how far they had moved on from the original 'Warehouse' idea. No Christian night-club had been established and the project of achieving a mission to the dance culture had since faded. The group organised itself as one collective, not several committees, and decisions were made in dialogue with all participating members. Although still effectively financed by gifts from its members, *Visions* was now integrated into the 'covenanting' system of St Michael-le-Belfrey, which provided them with a budget each year. There were no more visits to night-clubs, and not enough time to perform the visuals at club nights. The group had matured, relaxed its structures, and developed an outlook somewhat removed from the evangelistic zeal characteristic of its early years.

These changes have affected the structure as well as the shared attitudes of the group. As an initial insight into the culture of *Visions*, it is useful to first examine the structure and composition of its membership.

Participants: Core and Periphery

(1) The Core Group

In a curious, but significant reflection of its parent church, *Visions* embrace a collective of participants which may be divided into core and periphery. Those most committed to its services, who attend regularly, contribute to service planning and orchestration, and who attend weekly small group sessions, refer to themselves as the ‘core group’. At the time of my fieldwork they numbered fourteen, although several of these ‘members’ were attending less frequently than they used to, because of other commitments.

The core group form the creative driving force behind *Visions* events. The group are split equally by gender, comprising seven males and seven females. The youngest member is 16, the oldest 44. The median age of the group is 30, in reflection of those several long standing members who together joined in the early 1990s following their university years. The majority of the group have been involved for at least several years, and many are original members. A great number enjoy an advanced knowledge of computer technology and visual reproduction, some occupying vocations in these areas. Members who do not work in computer technology occupy jobs in expressive or service oriented areas such as writing or teaching.

The core group also boast a high level of academic proficiency. Virtually all of the members who are old enough have been to university, and four of them have postgraduate training in computing. In the past, this proportion has been greater – of the twenty members I managed to contact, both past and present, eight have postgraduate training, either in computing or in theology. Several have PhDs. This

factor has had a crucial influence upon the shifting orientation of *Visions* over the years, many decisions being taken after exhaustive 'academic' discussion. Indeed, the advanced technical and theological knowledge shared by the group remains a key influence on the construction of group discourse within and outside of services.

Eight of the core members are married couples, and in two of these cases one half of the couple entered the group after their partner had become an established member. All of the other members are single. Participation in the group has tended to carry high demands, incorporating changes of lifestyle as well as a considerable time commitment, so it is hardly surprising that married and attached individuals have not tended to commit without their partners.

Although members come from a variety of denominational backgrounds, most have an evangelical background and the majority have graduated to *Visions* from St Michael-le-Belfrey. Consequently, the inherited repertoire of Christian tradition is significantly influenced by an experience of charismatic evangelicalism as it has been manifest in the St Michael's congregation. It is also significant that, of those who used to attend St Michael's services, most have not attended again regularly since the early 1990s. Those who attend sporadically favour the family service; most avoid the charismatic evening service at all costs.

Unlike in the early days of *Warehouse*, core members do not hold 'official' group positions. They do, however, tend to adopt certain roles within the context of service preparation and performance. Rebecca Wilson, as full-time arts co-ordinator for the group, is responsible for designing and facilitating services, although the processes of

planning and running services are shared by the whole group, according to the technical expertise and natural talent of members. Core members also take turns in initiating topics and activities for small group meetings, which may revolve around theological discussion, or a purely social occasion, such as a barbecue or candle making. Although the group adopt a less formalised structure than in the past, there are still expectations that core members commit significant time and effort to *Visions* projects. Indeed, the practical and creative demands of alternative worship make this a necessity.

In order to provide a more detailed picture of the core group, it will be useful to offer some brief descriptions of key members at the time of fieldwork.

Adam is 30, and works as a post-doctoral researcher in computer science at York university. He first began attending St Michael's as a student when he was eighteen, although because of his Presbyterian background, he did not get on with the charismatic worship there. Keen to embrace a more ritualistic spirituality, he became interested in paganism, primarily through discussion groups on the internet. He had also attended NOS in Sheffield, and was attracted to the worship there, commenting that "...they aimed to give an experience of wonder and mystery surrounding God, which I suppose... I felt was missing from St Michael's...[which] very much focussed on intimacy with God." He had met Daniel Green on a student outreach project and was inspired by his idea for a Christian night-club, and so agreed to help out with the 'Warehouse Project'. Two years later, in 1991, he decided to commit to the group permanently. He now acts as DJ at *Visions* services after being introduced to dance music and recording technology through the group. When I asked him what he likes

best about being a part of *Visions*, he referred to the multi-sensory nature of worship, and the opportunities for personal input. "...When you have some input into your worship event it becomes much more satisfying 'cause you feel that you own it..."

Emma is 31 and works as a secondary school teacher. She attended St Michael's as a student and retained a connection with the church after she began working locally, especially through the close connections she had made with the surrogate, 'church family' the leadership had provided during her university days. She entered *Warehouse* through her boyfriend (now husband), Phil, who had been an original core member. She now attends regularly, although is finding it hard due to other commitments. She prefers *Visions* to other kinds of church because she feels she is accepted for who she is. As she says, "...it's OK to be me...we have got quite a broad range of beliefs on different issues, and we can live with that, and we do accept that different people have different attitudes."

Robert is 44 and works as a freelance lecturer in history and local tour guide. After being brought up in a variety of evangelical churches he moved to York, and was attracted to St Michael's because of the high proportion of others in his age group. However, during the mid 1990s he began to question his evangelical faith. He questioned the authority of the Bible and the integrity of those who taught it. Disillusioned with what he saw as hypocrisy and prejudice within St Michael's, he began to attend *Visions*. Asked why he still attends, he says, "I like the acceptance, the flexibility, the relaxed atmosphere... *Visions* allow you space to sort of explore your own view."

(2) Peripheral Participants

In addition to the core group, *Visions* events attract a periphery clientele numbering in between ten and fifteen individuals. These range from regulars at St Michael's, to visitors from other churches, to members of other alternative worship groups from around the region. Whereas core members typically attend virtually every meeting, peripheral participants tend to come along perhaps once every two months, or more sporadically. Peripheral participants also tend to prefer, and therefore often limit their attendance, to particular *Visions* services. Some prefer the solemnity of communion, others the upbeat celebration of the dance service.

Peripheral participants occasionally take an active part in services, but for the most part take a more passive role. They also prefer to restrict their participation to the Sunday service itself. This is partly because the core group are very close-knit, and share a common history. Peripheral members could – and in some cases do – often feel ostracised because of the inevitable barriers that such intimacy generates.

Changing Structures

Over time the *Visions* group appears to have turned inwards, to focus upon servicing its own needs rather than those of a target audience. This is reflected in the relationship between core and periphery. Whereas the group were once driven and defined by an evangelistic mission to the dance subculture, they now focus upon catering to the needs of core members. They have shifted from being a community concerned with expansion and evangelism, to one preoccupied with sustaining a sense of meaning for those already within its boundaries. Their evangelistic zeal has faded, and their limited attempts to foster a wider community are reflected in the relative

alienation felt by occasional attendees. But what forces have driven this change? Moreover, how has this shift from an external to an internal focus been reflected in shared values and group projects?

The *Visions* group embody a particular reconfiguration of charismatic evangelicalism. This can be described in terms of three dimensions: the 'defusal' of authority reacts against perceived problems in the tradition; the mobilisation of the aesthetic equips the group with new tools in the construction of its identity; and the reconfiguration of shared attitudes refers to changes in its shared belief system. I will take each of these dimensions in turn.

Dimensions of the Reconfiguration Process

1. 'Defusing' Authority

The evolution of the *Visions* group has been largely shaped by a growing sensitivity to the power trappings of what Weber called "charismatic authority", i.e. authority based on the exceptional character or qualities of individuals (Weber, 1967: 245-8). This kind of authority is seen as characteristic of charismatic evangelical churches, and is a focus of serious criticism. The phenomenon that *Visions* members refer to is authority associated with charismatic experience and sometimes Biblical knowledge. But what is opposed is not the bases of these claims, but the paternalistic and uncompromising way in which they tend to be applied. In *The Post-Evangelical*, Dave Tomlinson argues that paternalism, the parent-like authority that demands compliance without compromise, is rife in evangelicalism and is the cause of many young people leaving the church (Tomlinson, 1995: 54). Such unquestioned forms of authority, so

Tomlinson argues, have lost their credibility in a post-modern world characterised by a suspicion towards grand narratives. Such absolute claims to truth are seldom perceived as anything but the veiled expressions of someone else's self-interest.

The members of the *Visions* group would be inclined to agree with this, and have focussed their efforts for some time on 'defusing' the authorities that cause such problems. By 'defusing' I mean a combined process of undermining, rendering ineffectual and marginalising within public contexts. This effort pervades the way in which they arrange services, and also the way in which they interact with one another. They do not openly engage with other church bodies, including that of their parent church, in critiquing this issue, but arrange their own events as a response to it. In effect, *Visions* offer an 'idioculture' – a system of knowledge, beliefs and customs shared by members of the group (Fine, 1979)- that consciously attempts to remedy the problems associated with an overly-paternalistic evangelicalism.

The characteristics of this response are focussed in the worship that *Visions* offers. The group attempt to offer an environment in which individuals can feel comfortable, not oppressed or pressurised. Members refer to the fact that services are held in semi-darkness, that no collection plate is handed round, that there are no altar calls, no sermon and that the Bible is left to 'speak for itself' through readings or word loops, rather than through the medium of a preacher. In effect, very few practical demands are made of someone participating in a *Visions* event, and newcomers often remark on how passive they are allowed to be. The effort to avoid pressurising or patronising gestures is also extended to the group's approach to charismatic gifts. Having since moved away from the 'ministry in the spirit', *Visions* still occasionally offer to pray

over people. However, they reserve this practice until after the service and perform the prayer in the church office, thus avoiding any public spectacle and ensuring a private and secure environment for the recipient. Their general outlook stands in direct opposition to the perceived confrontational tone of mainstream evangelical churches, with their stress on public confession and on bringing outsiders to a “point of decision”. *Visions* favour what might be called a ‘softer’ approach, offering rituals that do not highlight personal differences nor call for public confessions. In this, they unwittingly echo trends in the ‘post-emotional’ take on the charismatic within St Michael’s (see chapter five).

The group also sees itself as offering a place where difficult questions can be asked without fear of judgement, especially in small groups (see chapter seven) and in after-service conversation. *Visions* attempt to provide a haven for the ‘safe’ exploration of personal beliefs, opposing the evangelical tendency to judge or restrict dialogue in order to limit deviation from an established norm. In doing this, the group is advocating a positive embrace of radical diversity, allowing for disagreement and difference without the need for judgement.

This ‘open’ approach is justified by the group with reference to the shortcomings of the mainstream church as a whole. As Daniel puts it,

“There are people for whom the church has, and I mean the church in its sort of broad sense, has actually rejected them, specifically and in words of one syllable – you in your present form as a person are not acceptable. And *Visions* has just said, no, there’s no problem, we take you as you are.”

The needs of the individual are placed above issues of theological correctness, in reflection of the friendship evangelism that originally inspired the ‘Warehouse Project’. The group pride themselves on this open attitude, and often justify its

validity with reference to the many people who have felt ostracised by the church, but welcomed within *Visions*. These are said to fall into the categories most treated with intolerance or disdain by mainstream evangelicals: homosexuals, women, the mentally ill. Members also mention those ‘damaged’ people who are, because of their background, especially sensitive to the confrontation and exposure that evangelical churches often demand: those who have been abused, or who suffer from depression.

Most significantly, members of *Visions* see this accommodating, inclusivist approach as part and parcel of their Christian identity. They are not merely a compensatory service for the disenfranchised, nor are they providing respite as a gateway to evangelism. Rather, they are embodying what they see as the most Christian of values. Characteristically, they look to Jesus as the primary moral example. To quote Daniel again,

“*Visions* makes a special point of this, of accepting people for who they are, how they are, wherever they are – sexual orientation, even sexual practice, belief system, religious extremism in a way – whatever it is, we in a rather, and I was hoping to avoid this word, a rather post-modern, pic ‘n’ mix fashion, we just say, you’re welcome here, as you are, who you are *because that’s what Jesus would say...*”

This of course raises the question: what are the boundaries of acceptance? *Visions* would certainly not advocate a *laissez faire* morality or any theological liberalism that has no limitations. The significant point here is that although members do recognise some viewpoints as objectionable or unChristian, they do not see this difference as a legitimate grounds for exclusion from their community. Moreover, members see negative or dismissive judgement on the basis of such differences as essentially unChristian. Their effort to foster outsiders as welcome extends to a resistance towards imposing any form of ‘evangelical’ discourse upon them. Consequently, ‘theology’ is couched in the subjunctive, and individuals are left to grow according to

their own individual experience. This extends into ritual, in which participants are encouraged to find their own meaning in the event, rather than have one imposed upon them. For example, in explaining to me the structure of the *Visions* sung creed (see appendix C), Rebecca Wilson advocated an approach to worship that offers opportunities for participation on a number of levels. The driving principle was clearly focussed on the need to accommodate a broad spectrum of people, from the most orthodox, to those only able to commit to the most peripheral values of the group.

“It was much easier to write what we didn’t believe [rather than] about...what we believed. And concentrate on the most important things in the chorus. God, a passionate creator. Christ who died to save us, etc. Then if people didn’t feel able to join in with the chorus they could sing heartily in the verses.”

In offering opportunities for participation that demand little change or adjustment from the outsider, *Visions* advocate an understanding of spiritual growth that is non-intrusive. The belief underpinning this is that such freedom of growth, apart from paternalistic authority, engenders a more authentic expression of selfhood. As one member put it, “people should be left to experience the service and find God there, and then theorise it afterwards...then, if people ask about Christianity, we could tell them.”

In this sense the group advocate the nurturing of a place of welcome for the marginalised at all costs. But although members tend to justify this position with reference to an orientation to outsiders, they also embrace this ethos because of their own experience. Many explain their attraction to *Visions* with reference to how they are able to ‘be themselves’ without fear of being judged. Rebecca exemplifies this attitude,

“...you don’t feel the ‘thought police’ are out to get you, if you say things the wrong way or disagree with a certain part of evangelical Christian subculture, or if your lifestyle doesn’t quite fit, or what you do for a hobby doesn’t quite fit...people feel safe, I think,

which is nice...particularly vulnerable people – ...gay people, people with depression feel safe. They don't feel that somebody's out to put a hand on their hand and say 'be healed', and if they're not healed, they accuse them of not having enough faith..."

Suspicion towards external authorities extends into the way the group deal with authority within their own ranks. In principle, the group adopts an approach to leadership that accepts the input of all members as equal. On one telling occasion, a suggestion from the vicar that Daniel was the chairperson provoked tangible discomfort and a vociferous rejection. Adam corrected the vicar – Daniel was merely taking the notes. This was a classic demonstration of Garfinkel's claim that embedded assumptions are made conscious through behaviour that challenges them (Garfinkel, 1984: 47-9). The group have no conception of being subject to a chairperson, or any kind of leader for that matter, and were clearly offended by the suggestion. While certainly driven by dominant personalities, the group as a whole sees itself as a democratic collective, and there is a shared cynicism towards institutional or 'official', role-based power. Moreover, in Adam's comment there is a clear effort to play-down the roles taken on by group members, emphasising collaboration and co-operation within an egalitarian exchange of ideas.

Members display a great deal of reflexivity in their explanations of these attitudes, and often refer back to experiences of evangelicalism as the source of their concerns. Indeed, the popular rapport sustained between members is premised on a tacit understanding of evangelical stereotypes and a willingness to undermine them with humour and irony. Even some of the printed literature produced by the group expresses such irreverent playfulness, displaying a cheeky humour that some mainstream evangelicals would deem quite blasphemous. A classic example can be found in one of the early *Warehouse* fliers, which advertised a forthcoming service.

Designed around the style of a crisp packet, the emblem reads “XP Crisps” (inverting the popular brand into the Chi Rho symbol), “Smoky Jesus Flavour”. The flier continues to list the “ingredients” of the service as “smoke, God, video screens, The Spirit, techno, and the Word Himself.”

Some authors have argued that such irreverent play with religious symbols is symptomatic of the post-modern disillusionment with institutional religion (Beaudoin, 1998). It is suggestive of *bricolage*, a tendency to take elements from disparate sources and reassemble them in an attempt to convey new meaning (Lyon, 2000: 117). What is clear within the *Visions* context, is that this attempt is also driven by a pervasive need to undermine and question the norms of authority represented by mainstream evangelicalism. In subjecting them to humorous comment, in de-centring their place in services, and in problematising their integrity through discourse, the group effectively undermine key aspects of the evangelical subculture.

Repressive Tolerance

It is tempting to view *Visions* as inclusive in the extreme. Its ‘defusal’ of external authorities appears to lead to an embrace, or at least acceptance, of every possible channel of diversity. This prompts the question: which perspective would not be welcome among the group? The clear answer to this is the standard perspective of charismatic evangelicalism. In a sense, the group excludes nothing apart from an exclusivist framework. In practice, members also reject the subcultural baggage that they associate with such frameworks – vociferous preaching, autocratic hierarchy, ‘power evangelism’. Hebert Marcuse long ago noted that liberation does not imply absolute freedom or a *laissez faire* ethos, but requires a discriminating tolerance

(Marcuse, 1969: 102). Tolerance is, in this respect, inevitably repressive, and while *Visions* appear tolerant of most perspectives, they are intolerant of what they perceive as most offensively exclusivist, and this is the tradition against which they define themselves.

It is the omission of a more critical analysis of tolerance that is the most serious limitation of Donald Miller's work (Miller, 1997). Miller simply takes practical inclusivism to be an extension of a Protestant 'democratisation of the sacred'. In 'new paradigm' churches like those in the Vineyard network, all are welcome because all may have access to a personal experience of God. He does not explore the cultural dynamics of exclusion that this ethos inevitably entails, and thus arrives at an incomplete understanding of group boundaries.

While *Visions* are firmly suspicious of charismatic power, this does not mean that the group operate on a level playing field. Power does exist within its confines, but as a more insidious pressure to conform to a particular framework. It is through such pressure that dissenting views are excluded. Thus, while affirming an inclusive ideology, *Visions* still operate within particular boundaries of acceptability. The social mechanisms that sustain this set of boundaries will be more fully explored in chapter seven.

2. Mobilising the Aesthetic

Visions, and the rest of the alternative worship network, stand in many ways as a continuation of the charismatic movement and its introduction of a new vibrancy into worship, funded by art and technology (Walker, 1997: 27). Most influential in this

respect were the radical innovations of NOS, whose use of audio-visual technology expanded the symbolic capital with which Christians could legitimately experiment. It is this technology that has allowed for a blurring of boundaries between Christianity, youth culture, hedonism, political action and communitarianism. In effect, this opened up the boundaries within which Christianity could be conceived and practised.

One consequence of this has been a tendency to conceive of worship within a broad frame of reference, driven by aesthetic as well as theological principles. The most obvious signal of this within *Visions* revolves around the often cited question of whether an event was genuine 'alt.worship'. Some group members are quite firm in their conception of alt.worship, although their expressions tend to focus on what it is not. Alt.worship does not use live instruments or involve charismatic choruses, for example, and alt.worship does not use sermons. Services that are multi-media based but incorporate these elements are seen as 'youth' services, or as 'more evangelical' or 'mainstream', rather than *genuinely* 'alternative'. Patterns of discourse here display parallels with what some sociologists have argued about youth sub-cultures. Identity is not only constructed around notions of otherness, but is also founded in understandings of authenticity that arise from this (Widdecombe and Wooffitt, 1995). What is more, identity is shaped by aesthetic judgements about the comparative efforts of one's peers, a process characteristic of discourse on pop music (Frith, 1996).

But in addition to such aesthetic pretensions, *Visions* assess their worship according to the reactions of individuals within the group. In the context of meetings, members often refer to what 'works' as a vague, instinctive and pragmatic notion of success or failure. Clearly, the individual 'gut' response is as important a criterion as any for the

efficacy of a worship event. It depends upon whether individuals feel the worship has been *personally authentic* for them. Such ideas suggest an ultimately vague and undefined orientation to aesthetic expression. However, observation of services together with interaction with the group reveal a key set of features, consistently affirmed as positive aspects of the worship experience.

One such feature could be described as a move towards holism, i.e. an engagement with all of the senses through worship. This is endorsed by members through a contrast with the ‘overly rhetorical’ style of mainstream evangelical worship. Adam explains his preference as making up for the ‘wordy’ Presbyterianism that he grew up with,

“...we try to engage all the senses so you have hearing, and touch, taste and smell, with incense and so on, which feels more holistic than my earlier Christian experience... Words were of paramount importance – words of hymns, words of the sermon, words of prayer...there’s no visual imagery at all in the Presbyterian church... but there’s an awful lot more when you come to the Orthodox church or alt.worship...[it] expands the realms into which spirituality has a significance.”

The generation of a multi-sensory experience is dependent upon technology – the use of multiple TV screens, video projection and slide imagery alongside constant dance rhythms and ambient mixes and – in *Visions* – the use of incense. But it is also invoked in the rituals performed by the group. Each *Visions* service includes some kind of prayer ritual, and each involves a physical kind of participation – writing letters to God before offering them up in a burning boat, meditating over a small stone before placing it in a water fountain (see Wallace, 2000). For members, these rituals represent an effort to communicate with God in a way that moves beyond the limitations of language. Indeed, simple, silent physical acts can achieve great significance in the eyes of the group when performed in services. Daniel once recounted his feeling that even if participants did not take communion at *Visions*, their

act of passing on the communion cup to their neighbour was an expression of community in itself. There is a tendency to attach importance to simple acts that require no commentary, to see the symbolic meaning in what might otherwise be seen as banal or routine. Most pervasively, there is a consistent effort to marginalise the status of spoken words (especially in the imperative voice) as components of the worship experience, and the emphasis upon silent actions could be conceived as a natural response to this.

While promoting a multi-sensory experience, *Visions* services stress the visual aspect above all else. At each service, a new collage of slide images are constructed and projected onto the east wall, multiple TV screens show a concatenation of moving pictures that is mixed live, and a video projector adds more depth and dynamism to the vividly adorned building (see chapter one). These images offer no coherent message and suggest no clear narrative. Their rapid progression promotes a kind of “translocalism”, creating a sense that one is participating in a larger project (Hoover, 1988). Taken as a whole, *Visions* services reconfigure the sensory dimensions in which one stands, and in so doing allow novel conceptions of sacred space.

The aesthetics of *Visions* – the stress on the visual, on engaging all of the senses, on ambiguity – can be explained as part of their reaction to mainstream evangelical subculture. In particular, they stand as an implicit critique of embodied authorities and of the power of rhetoric. The multi-referentiality afforded by the exploitation of technology tallies with the group’s unease with monolithic tradition, and offers opportunities for an experimentation of thought and practice. The heavy use of technology – of vivid and ever-changing visual imagery – could be construed as a

vicarious form of religion (Davie, 2000: 81), the ethos of non-intrusion leaving space for solitary thought and meditation. The passivity characteristic of services allows for a variety of individual responses. Moreover, the appropriation of the aesthetic in *Visions* has been used to generate a context for reflexivity without closure, a tradition without definition. Ritually speaking, *Visions* repaint Christianity as a hierophany of many voices, and the resultant lack of clarity is embraced by the group as a positive feature of their project. This is not to say that members welcome confusion. They embrace the multivalency inherent in services as a welcome tension, or a variety of stimuli. Participants appear to find meaning in services in spite of – or perhaps because – they rule out any consistent message.

But worship also offers the group a sense of empowerment. They redesign each worship event anew – offering new combinations of themes, visuals and rituals each time. Most, if not all, core members contribute to the design and setting up of services, forming a democratically organised collective of ‘ritual entrepreneurs’ (Bell, 1997: 224). Even I was allowed to contribute to service planning, and one week found myself distributing candles, contributing to what was effectively sacred space. When I asked how I should arrange them, I was only given loose guidelines – the arrangement of the room was very much left to the creative impulses of those present.

In effect, *Visions* have radicalised the popular charismatic understanding that worship must come from the heart of the individual. They see worship as an expression of their individual Christian identities through their practical control over the organisation and performance process. As Adam puts it,

“I think worship very much has to be something that’s from you and when you’re just participating in somebody else’s thing, that can be OK, but it doesn’t really connect

completely... when you have some input into your worship event it becomes much more satisfying...it comes from within you instead of being imposed on you.”

This sense of ‘ownership’ is in part dependent upon technology. The use of visual and audio equipment transfers the balance of power from the liturgical tradition and the institutionalised priesthood, to those who have the necessary skills to use it. There are also economic factors at play. Smith and Maughan have argued that, as advancing technology made it increasingly cheap to make and distribute dance records, so the cultural axis of the dance sub-culture shifted from the major record labels to the small time DJs who were producing the music. In effect, they became the producers of the culture (Smith and Maughan, 1998). A similar claim can be made for alternative worship, and for *Visions*. The increasing availability and affordability of technical equipment has helped the group assemble an impressive stock of TVs, video mixers, projectors and audio equipment. This, together with their growing expertise in the use of this equipment, has enabled them to explore in increasingly innovative ways the complexities of Christian worship and tradition. *Visions have become the producers of their own Christian sub-culture.*

But this sub-culture is not purely ritualistic in its expression; it has ideological dimensions as well. Ritual innovation has given rise to, and emerges alongside, a generation of new meanings and values. And although worship suggests a rather chaotic outlook, expressed attitudes do follow particular patterns.

3. The Reconfiguration of Shared Attitudes

As detailed above, most members of *Visions* have an evangelical background. Moreover, they see much of their present outlook as a reaction to the problems they

have come to recognise in the evangelical tradition. These problems may be summarised as an overly narrow view of faith, an autocratic and paternalistic system of authority and an insufficiently reflective orientation towards tradition and evangelism. According to the *Visions* group, together these promote an objectionably judgmental mindset which excludes many people for either misguided cultural or misplaced theological reasons. Their alternative worldview is revisionist, but it is not equally dismissive of all facets of traditional evangelical belief. In fact, *Visions* members retain certain values that are arguably quintessential to the tradition they see themselves as critiquing.

They hold, for example, to a belief in the radical dependency of humanity upon God, interpreting their lives as a struggle with God rather than merely with the church. This is accompanied by an unswerving faith in God's reality and immanence in the affairs of everyday life, a feature also pervasive throughout the St Michael's congregation (see chapter five). In relation to this, *Visions* members take experience of God to be the basis of the Christian life, seeing processes within their subjective 'faith lives' as divinely guided. Faith in the supernatural is retained, as is a belief in miracles. Moreover, in a direct continuation of the traditions of their parent church, *Visions* adopt an understanding of the 'faith life' of Christians as necessarily holistic. Indeed, this notion was a precondition for the original birth of the group, which has always carried expectations of radical commitment from its members. Finally, *Visions* adhere to a conception of Christian identity as an achieved rather than an ascribed status. In common with evangelicalism at large, they see denominational identity as incidental, seeing inclusion in the faith as rather based on a personal relationship with God.

However, as will be outlined below, the group's understanding and expression of this relationship complicates the boundaries usually set down by their mainstream peers.

Visions treat the bulk of traditional Christian attitudes as things to be questioned and critiqued. This is not seen as a negative process of debunking and selectively throwing out key doctrines, but is seen as a positive process of debate and reflection, necessary if one is to avoid holding uncritically to tradition. In this respect, the public and private discourses of *Visions* are far closer together than they are in St Michael's, a consequence of its small scale and of sharing the process of constructing worship events. Following this, the ambiguity and detraditionalisation expressed in services is mirrored in a detraditionalisation of attitudes. The inevitable diversity that this produces is not seen as a problem. Internal differences are seen as a welcome protective device against monolithic tradition, the group preferring a healthy tension of attitudes over an uncritical re-iteration of orthodoxy. Whereas diversity in St Michael's is only affirmed as overlaying an essential unity, diversity is wholly embraced in *Visions* and as creative, constructive and healthy. It is celebrated as a basis of mutual learning. Unsurprisingly, therefore, there is something of a diversity of perspectives within the *Visions* group, at least insofar as theology is concerned. What unites members is the general direction in which their reconfiguration of mainstream evangelical attitudes moves.

A key aspect of this process might be described as a movement towards perpetual de-differentiation, the process whereby previously established or traditional differences become deregulated, commonly associated with 'post-modern' manifestations of religion (Heelas, 1998). It is a process that is closely connected to *bricolage*, the

reassembling of phenomena in fresh configurations of meaning. What is evident among the *Visions* group is an attempt to problematise firm distinctions frequently maintained by mainstream evangelicals. Drawing from the arguments of liberal intellectual discourse, *Visions* members reject these distinctions, seeing them as simplistic dichotomies. Church/culture, truth/falsity, sacred/profane – all are undermined in favour of a more subtle, complex, and ultimately less defined outlook. Rejecting the straightforward boundaries commonly assumed between Christianity and other faiths, one member preferred to see the entire world of spiritual tradition as a potential source of value,

“I think there’s valuable wisdom in all spiritual traditions, and, there’s a lot of dross as well...in Christianity – a lot of dross in Christian history, which could do with being thrown away, but that’s something we’ve got to join together as sort of participants in faith, and try to sort out what’s...valuable and what’s not.”

In this case, treating Christianity as but one tradition among many is used as the basis for a kind of relativism. Just as there is much good in other traditions, so there is much that needs to be thrown out of Christianity. The criterion for a valuable spiritual resource is not restricted by traditional boundaries of faith. Indeed, at one *Visions* Taize service, a Muslim friend of the group performed a spiritual reading in Arabic, a contribution which was commented upon positively by core members. Several members adopt a liberal, relativist view of other faiths, some even extending their tolerance into a position that comes close to the notion of universal salvation. One member commented that she would never condemn Muslims, as they are finding God as best they can, and suggested the possibility that Jesus might appear to them offering salvation after death.

The tendency towards de-differentiation was most strikingly evident in responses to my questions about salvation. Using common evangelical parlance, I asked *Visions*

members in interviews: ‘how are we saved?’ They were fully aware of the ‘stock’ answers that evangelicals frequently give to these questions, and regarded them with a cynical humour. Their position seemed to be that these were empty words affirming a position that was ill-thought out and ultimately untenable. One core member even implied that he now had trouble finding meaning in these words,

“I always think of being saved as odd because it’s a phrase I grew up with...it calls for a need for salvation and now I just think, saved from what? Saved from what? So I’m not really sure what it means...”

The alternative answers offered were varied, some ultimately claiming that they could not say; what’s more, they appeared to prefer not to know, rather than claim one of the ‘stock’ evangelical answers. Mystery and ambiguity are not things that trouble the group, even when associated with such fundamental questions. Indeed, members would probably suggest that it is because such issues are of fundamental importance that they are shrouded in mystery, ultimate truth remaining outside of the grasp of human limitations. Parishioners within St Michael’s are united in voicing a clear affirmation of substitutionary atonement; within *Visions*, salvation is apprehended as something far more elusive.

However, an alternative understanding of faith is evident, and centres on the notion of a journey or pilgrimage. Emphasising process and change without any confirmed or defined end, this understanding undermines notions of conversion (and consequently salvation) as an instantaneous, transforming experience. Rather, being a Christian is seen as a journey that is both divinely and culturally inspired, thus undermining the simple distinctions often made between Christians and ‘the world’, Christians and culture, or Christians and other faiths. Following this understanding, members sometimes make sense of their project as a source of spiritual nurture for people

moving along their own journey. *Visions* is conceived as a place of respite, from which post-modern pilgrims may take comfort and sustenance, before moving on. As one member put it:

“We’re talking about a 21st century perspective of moving down the road from one point to another, and there are many people for whom *Visions* has been a deeply significant factor in moving on that road. And there are a number of people who’ve said to me that they are so grateful for *Visions* doing what it does because it’s showed them that you can have a faith and not commit cultural suicide, showed them that actually God *is* real and *is* relevant, showed them that there is hope, there is life, you know.”

In this way a process of de-differentiation has pushed *Visions* beyond the evangelistic fervour characteristic of its early years. The group no longer measures its ‘success’ in terms of how many people attend, or how many non-Christians they have ‘converted’. Rather, they take pleasure in the number of non-Christians or ‘lapsed’ Christians who have left with a sense of hope and a positive outlook. Even if people move on with only a vague religiosity, or no faith whatsoever, the fact that someone has shared in the vision is sufficient for the group’s conception of Christian witness.

This is well illustrated through an account of a conversation I had with Daniel and Alison, two of the core members, about halfway through my fieldwork period. After a service, we began talking about my own experience of the group.

‘So what do you reckon to this alt.worship stuff then?’, Daniel asks me. I consider my answer: *‘I think if I’d gotten involved in my teenaged years, then things would have probably developed differently, with regard to my view of the church.’* They acknowledge this with thoughtful looks but without comment...Daniel says that he suspects no one in the group has asked me whether I am a Christian. *‘But Roger [the vicar] has’*, he abruptly and knowingly adds. *(I’m not sure how he knows this, but Daniel appears to be making a point).* I am taken aback, and say that yes, I had

noticed this. I also say that throughout St Michael's, almost everyone has asked me this same question. I say that this assumes this category means something to me, and that people will understand my position upon a yes or no answer. Daniel seems to empathise with my concern, and says that the [Visions] group now recognises that these categories no longer have any meaning. He instead suggested seeing Christian identity in terms of helping people on a journey, although Alison does add, 'which will have a Christian direction, hopefully...!' ” (adapted from fieldnotes 16/1/00)

Having rejected many of the ideological boundaries of evangelicalism (including that between Christian and non-Christian), *Visions* embrace a perspective that resists judgement of others and any kind of evangelical exclusivism. In practice, as discussed above, this amounts to the fostering of minority groups often ostracised by the mainstream church. Whereas many evangelicals oppose women's authority and homosexuality on the basis of Christian teaching, *Visions* see this as a rejection of lifestyle and consider this rejection to be unChristian. Echoing Dave Tomlinson (1995: 32), they trace these attitudes to middle class prejudice and an unwillingness to question the authority of church leaders. In contrast to this, *Visions* together adopt a liberal attitude towards women and homosexuality, one member even going so far as to say they are 'anti-homophobic', a sentiment also recanted in the group's sung creed (see appendix C).

Such a position carries inevitable consequences for the group's understanding of Biblical authority. Moreover, their shared academic proficiency means that members feel the need to hold to theological positions that are intellectually tenable. Therefore, several of them reject parts of the Old Testament and of the Pauline letters, due to an

unequivocal condemnation of homosexuality, a conservative teaching on women, and the apparent advocacy of mass violence. Members rather draw from the texts insofar as they find them ‘useful’ in their spiritual lives, several including the apocrypha in their preferred choice of reading. Effectively, the authority of church, tradition and Bible are all treated as subject to personal critique in the light of personal experience and reason. In searching for some final authority, members tend to focus on the figure of Jesus above all else, as both practical example and teacher. One member was particularly frank in expressing his position,

“An awful lot in the Bible, to be honest, repels me, particularly in the Old Testament. An awful lot in Paul repels me, but, it’s the person of Jesus Christ that’s so attractive really – such an interesting person, such a...fascinating character. I suppose I believe he’s God as well, though...or God’s son or whatever, something special.”

Such an openly selective approach to the Bible reflects the group’s attitude that the texts are not infallible, but products of specific times and cultures, testaments by humans about what they experienced as God. It also reveals what they most readily support and embrace: teaching that is affirmative of humanity as a whole. The group reject the exclusivism of evangelical Christianity in favour of an orientation that is based on the acceptance of others, regardless of lifestyle, and they see the exemplar of this in Jesus himself.

That this outlook extends into understandings of the status of humanity is evidenced by the fact that some members have come to reject the doctrine of original sin. Indeed, several *Visions* members come closer to the notion of ‘original blessing’, famously argued by Matthew Fox, one time guru of the NOS community (see Fox, 1983). Fox argues against the traditional Christian doctrine commonly associated with Saint Augustine, and that is centralised within public evangelical culture as the teaching that we are all in sin, a state only redeemed upon our personal commitment to Christ.

Several *Visions* members clearly see this notion as far too open to abuse, stressing a simplistic exclusivism which counts against the loving accommodation that they see as the epitome of Christ's teaching. One individual was brutally frank,

“The doctrine of original sin was an invention of a Saint Augustine and I would have his books burnt and his own influence expunged from church history if I got my way.”

This core member goes on to connect original sin to evangelical ideas of salvation, saying how original sin condemns most of humanity (i.e. those who have not heard of Christ or converted to Christianity) to damnation. He sees this as incredible, ridiculous and unfair, once again expressing the common tendency within *Visions* to advocate a kind of humanitarian egalitarianism over what they see as the offensive teachings of the church. Christian truth is to be worked out in dialogue and according to one's own experience and thinking. While many in St Michael's affirm a reflective, critical perspective on the scriptures, they would probably not go as far as to openly undermine the validity of doctrine or individual books of the Bible. *Visions* invoke a more radically selective approach, openly voicing a rejection of certain writers, teachings and ideas in a way that puts the scriptures in the service of their more deeply seated spiritual convictions.

The most clearly stated and most uniformly shared values in *Visions* relate not to theological issues, but to moral topics. In particular, the group maintain a consistent focus upon social justice and environmental responsibility, incorporating these into their service and small group themes. There is also a discernible effort on the part of the group to apply the principles they endorse in their daily lives. In this way, they mark a sharp contrast with St Michael's, which fosters a public discourse which avoids moral issues or else maintains a notable moral ambivalence (see chapter four).

Social justice, for the *Visions* group, refers to fair trading, to the maintenance of global economic relations on equal terms, to the striving for human equality and the eradication of oppression and manipulation for monetary gain. It is grounded in a conviction of the basic human right for quality of life, and the recognition that the forces of our western culture are often complicit in compromising this right. Moreover, the eradication of injustice is seen as grounded in Christian identity and prescribed by God. According to an early *Warehouse* document entitled *Justice in Lifestyle*,

“We are not expected by God to stand on the sidelines and observe injustice. We are expected to get our hands dirty and resolve the problems. If we do not then we are complicit with the source of the injustice and will stand before God, condemned for our inaction.”

In this sense, the Christian life is seen as a radically political one, and carries with it responsibilities that may imply contravening the cultural norm. Indeed, the group often express the conviction that it is our culture that prevents us from doing the right thing. We are led by peer pressure, by the contingencies of fashion, or by the inertia of social normality, whereas the moral route often requires us to move against the cultural grain. In this way the common evangelical notion of ‘the world’ is reconceived in terms of an opposition to western consumerism and globalised capitalism. In contrast to its parent church, forces of evil are not primarily discerned in moral anomie, sexual decadence and the New Age, but in the corporate interests of big business, seen as a far greater barrier to moral integrity.

In practical terms, the rhetoric of *Visions* is not matched by participation in movements of mass protest. They primarily express their views on social justice by promoting initiatives like the World Development Movement and the Jubilee 2000 campaign through their services. Every three months a ‘cause of the quarter’ is

promoted, detailed in the printed leaflet which the group make freely available at each of their events. The second 'cause' for the year 2000 was the local Credit Union, based on the idea of a financial co-operative of individuals who issue loans to one another at a reasonable rate of interest. The aim of Credit Unions is to bypass the profiteering of the banking industry in order that individuals and families gain a greater control over their finances. An anti-capitalist ethic and pro-community ethos is implicit in this project, in reflection of the particular take on social justice adopted by *Visions* members.

In liberal religious circles, a concern for social justice has often been accompanied by a concern for the environment (Beyer, 1994: 209), and this is certainly the case in *Visions*. They expand the holism of the evangelical faith life into the adoption of an environmentally responsible lifestyle. Whereas St Michael's parishioners tend to focus upon working out an ethical orientation lived out in acts of giving and the embodiment of 'sound family values', the *Visions* group see their Christian responsibilities as incorporating recycling, buying fair trade goods, and minimising car use.

In advocating a concern for social justice, *Visions* are firmly situated among what Hunter has called the 'young' or 'radical' evangelicals (Hunter, 1987: 42). They support what are basically left-wing political values and stress social action as an end in itself, rather than purely as a means to converting others. Bearing in mind major social changes since the late 1980s, we might also associate this group with environmentalism, a major preoccupation of the UK alt.worship movement (Howard, 1995). *Visions* have embraced these ideas as a political agenda alongside their reconfiguration of worship. The presence of political ideas at all marks a break with St

Michael's, and a significant move into the preoccupations of a classically liberal religiosity.

Explanations of Change

The reconfiguration of shared values within the *Visions* group marks a radical transformation of their original project. The group were once driven by evangelism, maintained a strictly ordered and role-based organisational structure, and held multi-media, but fairly traditional charismatic services with sermons and ministry prayer. They are now driven largely by a quest to achieve meaning for their internal membership. They are democratically organised and shun any suggestion of official role positions. And their services use multi-media techniques to challenge Christian tradition, provoke questions and generate ambiguities. Alongside these changes, members have developed a shared value system that is passionately liberal, radically inclusivist and deeply experimental. So why the radical change?

First, the group have become increasingly proficient at running services. Early projects were by definition experimental, and the group had little conception of its aims and limited experience in the use of multi-media technology. Their response to this was to resort to heavily structured organisation procedures, implemented through a bureaucratised system of meetings and committees. But as the group began to develop skills and a technical expertise, this naïve insecurity faded. Members got used to working with each other's strengths and talents, and to the technology deployed in services, removing the need for such heavily structured procedures. A less rigid organisational structure has fostered a more relaxed mood and has created room for exploration and discussion.

Second, the group have had to deal with the changing domestic circumstances of core members, such as marriages, career changes and house moves which have put new pressures upon the group as a whole. Whereas once members had plenty of time to commit to group projects, these factors have made this less possible. In turn, the group has had to become more flexible in its expectations of members, relaxing its structures and abandoning some of its more demanding projects. The fervour of youth has given way to the realities of domestic life.

Third, the group have become more and more sensitive to the power trappings of person-based authority. It is significant that the *Warehouse* community structure was inspired by NOS, and when the Sheffield group collapsed in 1995, *Warehouse* became more aware of the potential problems associated with adopting fixed, non-negotiable group structures. The group had already been highly sensitive to the possibilities of power abuse inherent in religious authority, but the fall of NOS crystallised these worries in incidents which were close to home. *Visions* has consequently abandoned any internal role differentiation in favour of a more relaxed shared governance. Additionally, part of this shift has been the abandonment of evangelical norms such as the sermon - the group no longer foster an environment in which Christian beliefs are taught or advocated from the authority of a public platform. This creates room for a greater freedom of ideas, but has also meant that the group has relinquished any recognisable mission strategy. And a turn away from didactic proclamation has helped usher in a more inward-looking orientation.

Visions has moved away from evangelistic fervour and has instead adopted a kind of post-evangelical support structure. As Rebecca Wilson commented to me, "It's less

about authority now and more about the community thing.” *Visions* have always retained an anti-institutional aspect to their ethos. But previous projects have also been firmly situated within the inherited traditions of evangelicalism: the centrality of evangelism, fellowship through prayer and Bible study, the performance of charismatic gifts. These traditions have since been reconfigured or abandoned in favour of a new set of ideas – particularly the group’s aesthetic interests, concern for social justice and shared passion for community building. Services are no longer designed so as to appeal to clubbers, but are arranged to be culturally authentic to *Visions* members. In effect, evangelism has taken a back seat to a kind of communitarian expressivism.

This process of reconfiguration has, for some, signalled a rejection of key Christian values and a fading definition of group aims. The resulting discontent has led to conflict and dispute over goals, methods and leadership, and several core members have left. In its present incarnation, the group do not appear to be experiencing such problems, although it is unclear whether this is because the more opinionated and extrovert members have left, or because some kind of resolution has been achieved.

Cultural Distance: The Relationship between St Michael’s and Visions

The above description of how *Visions* has reconfigured certain elements of evangelicalism through their shared culture and worship projects now allows the identification of key differences between St Michael’s and *Visions*. Although it would be inaccurate to suggest that these constitute a strictly oppositional relationship, certain key contrasts can be made. Bearing in mind the internal diversity of the two

'groups', an effort will be made to restrict comment to those aspects which may be reasonably attributed to most if not all members.

	St Michael-le-Belfrey	Visions
Place of the Bible	Highest authority; Canon unquestioned; Stress on personal meaning found in texts.	High importance but one resource among many; Canon and authority critiqued; Selective use prioritises Jesus over Paul and Old Testament
Place of Charismatic Gifts	Not essential but valuable; Diversity acknowledged; Public and private practice.	Tolerant view; Public practice avoided; Private and secluded practice favoured.
Moral Values	Multi-focussed; Most conservative on sexual ethics.	Focus on practical giving, social justice, environmental ethics.
Gender	Moderately liberal attitudes, but leadership male dominated.	Equality stressed; Sensitive to non-inclusive practice.
Invocation of Jesus	Focus on his death and substitutionary atonement.	Focus on his practical acts (especially fostering the marginalised)
Politics	No clear position/trend; No attention given publicly.	Anti-capitalist and Anti-consumerist themes; Environmentalism; Broadly left-wing.
Organisation	Pyramid structure; Stress on lay leadership.	Stress on non-structure; Democratic collective.
Worship	Stress on words: explanation and exhortation.	Stress on images: provocation and exploration.

Table Six: St Michael-le-Belfrey and Visions - Contrasting Values.

Some aspects of the two groups suggest stark contrast: approaches to worship, organisational structure, the degree to which political issues are integrated into shared theological values. Others, such as the place of charismatic gifts, suggest a more subtle difference of emphasis in practice. A selectivity in the use of Biblical texts and reluctance to condemn non-Christians is a liberal trend in both camps. The distinction

lies in how *Visions* members are both more explicit, more vociferous and more unified in claiming this viewpoint. St Michael's members sense a need to veil their liberal ideas – one liberally minded parishioner claimed that there are other people like her in St Michael's, but they are not as vocal as the conservatives, as they “don't want to be branded a heretic”. *Visions* are unabashed by their views, at least within the safe confines of the core group. Attitudes towards women, politics and the figure of Jesus approximate to a conservative/liberal divide, traditionally defined. However, as detailed in chapter four, on at least the first of these, St Michael's reflects a compromise position.

Despite the obvious differences, *Visions* do embody a set of core values that may be argued as basic to a charismatic evangelical expression of Christianity: the importance of personal experience as a locus of the divine and an understanding of the Christian life as practically demanding. That these have proved most resistant to change is probably due to their reluctance to be bound in discursive, propositional descriptions. Experience and holism – unlike Christology, politics and morality – are difficult to pin down in definitive concepts or authoritative teachings. As such they may be transformed, reconceived, revised and put into practice in new ways whilst still apparently affirming the same basic idea. A similar case may be made for the shared understanding of evangelism within *Visions*. Many members still see the necessity of sharing the Gospel with non-Christians. That the application of their evangelistic efforts has been transformed into something so inclusive as to be unrecognisable as evangelism by their mainstream peers does not bother them. To them, evangelism takes many forms, the least effective being confrontation and proclamation.

Considering the major differences between the two groups, we may ask how they interact. Do these differences provoke tension, criticism or even conflict? In purely practical terms, there are no regular points of contact between the two factions. *Visions* organises its own initiatives independently and rarely liaises with the St Michael's leadership. Members of *Visions*, although officially also members of St Michael's, do not feel wholly a part of the church and so generally keep away from church gatherings. In terms of cross-attendance at services, *Visions* members do occasionally attend Sunday services in St Michael's, but these visits tend to reinforce their sense of alienation from the style of worship fostered there. According to the questionnaire survey, 43% of the St Michael's congregation have attended a *Visions* service at some point, although for the majority, this has been an occasional, isolated event like an Easter service, rather than attendance over time at any of the regular services.

What impressions do members tend to have of each other's identity? This became a curious issue during fieldwork. I questioned St Michael's members about *Visions*, and *Visions* members about St Michael's, and reports rarely tallied with my own experiences of either. In many ways the one side simply did not appear to appreciate what the other was doing. As *Visions* prides itself on being a haven for people who 'don't fit into normal church', an element of social tension is perhaps inevitable. To core *Visions* members, St Michael's is their home church, their chosen place within the Anglican communion, and yet it also represents much of what they oppose in mainstream evangelicalism. It is consequently the frequent focus of criticism in informal conversation, usually with reference to boring sermons, intolerant values or 'naff' music. To St Michael's congregants, *Visions* are a strange fringe group who,

although attached in some way to St Michael's, are somehow 'different', a bit 'weird' and to some, represent something that they cannot recognise as church. When asked to classify the group, St Michael's parishioners are tellingly undecided: 30% think *Visions* are 'Celtic Christian', 15% regard them as 'New Age'. 18% provide some other answer such as "dance culture worship" or "post-modern". 30% simply cannot say. Some parishioners said they see the value in what the group is doing, but feel that they just "do not scratch where I itch". Many make sense of the group as a mission to the dance culture, and see this agenda as excluding them from its events.

I heard very few congregants criticise *Visions* on its theology or services. Many see it as 'just not their thing', dismissing *Visions* on stylistic, aesthetic grounds. Most are unaware that *Visions* sees itself as a collective that stands for a particular set of values divergent from their own. The only theological objections made known to me were advanced by the clergy on the St Michael's staff. All three of them have celebrated communion at *Visions* services and feel uneasy with the direction in which the group is going. Eric feels that their relationship with the rest of the fellowship has been "tenuous". He believes that they need to become more integrated into the main structure of St Michael's, or else go their own way. Both Michael and Roger, the other two clergymen, basically voice the same concern: that the group emphasise visual symbols without sufficient space for their explanation or for Biblical teaching. They feel that, in downplaying rhetorical content, the group are failing to achieve the primary function of a church service, which is to communicate the Gospel in clear and comprehensible terms. Of course, this assumes that the Gospel may be effectively couched in rhetorical formulae, which is where *Visions* breaks away from its parent church. But these differences in approach also reflect different understandings of the

purpose of the service. To the clergy, *Visions* is a valid enterprise because it is evangelism, and this is why it needs to offer a clearer explanation of the Gospel message. In the eyes of its members, *Visions* has moved beyond the evangelistic project, and in primarily catering for its internal membership, the requirement for “explanation and exhortation” is even less appropriate.

In summary, there is very little conflict between the two factions of the church because there is very limited contact between them. And yet there is still a curious tension between the two parties, a sense of moving in different directions, of mutual and muted intolerance. This could be described as a ‘cultural distance’, rather than ideological disagreement. *Visions* members merely feel that they do not ‘fit’ within their parent church any more, and this generally applies to a greater extent *vice versa*. What is more interesting, is that this ‘distance’ is not generally based on an ongoing experience of the other faction. Rather, perceptions are grounded in shared vague impressions, more shaped by past prejudices than anything else. Members of each party appear to project feelings of discomfort and unease onto the other.

Opposition and Identity

It was argued earlier that the *Visions* group are best understood in terms of a reconfiguration of evangelical tradition. Its projects and shared values are shaped by an effort to distinguish itself from the charismatic evangelicalism that it finds most problematic. My observations suggest that this image of charismatic evangelicalism is not one that is represented in St Michael’s. Rather, *Visions* project onto their parent church a set of concerns which apply to a more general image of mainstream charismatic evangelicalism, that exaggerates particular dimensions. Indeed, the group

stress narrow conservatism and charismatic power abuse as those elements which they find most objectionable. It is as though they need to exaggerate these features in order to make sense of their own identity. For their whole ethos is based on a notion of remedying these problems, and in order to maintain a sense of meaning in what they do, they continually invoke that which they most vehemently oppose.

Comparisons: Similar Innovations

In many ways *Visions* have embraced a 'post-modern' take on spirituality. They emphasise the expansion of knowledge beyond rational, propositional language; an eclectic approach to symbols and their arrangement in novel combinations; a celebration of fragmentation, playfulness or irony; and an incredulity towards overarching metanarratives or frameworks of knowledge (Beckford, 1992). However, their projects and shared values are not immune from the shaping influence of local factors. This is brought out in a brief comparison of the group with other progressive communities drawing from similar resources, but within different contexts.

Mark Cartledge (1998) studied an Independent Charismatic Church in Liverpool which had been influenced by the writings and seminars of Dave Tomlinson. He found an ecumenical spirit and an emphasis upon acceptance and creativity in worship. He also found that glossolalia was practised chiefly as a private phenomenon, as part of a larger repertoire of symbols and resources, much like in St Michael-le-Belfrey. However, the church's 'post-modern' combination of divergent trends included an approach to the scriptures which was at times literalistic. In other words, the congregation embraced a broadening of spiritual resources, but no related liberal interpretation of the Bible.

In a study of the absorption of 'New Age' ideas into Christian groups, Daren Kemp (1999) examined the attitudes shared among the congregation of St James's, Piccadilly. Kemp comments that members are predominantly middle class, higher educated and a large majority are female, aged over fifty-five. Most have participated in 'New Age' practices such as healing workshops and homoeopathy. This reflects a generally critical perspective on church tradition and a post-Christian tendency in patterns of belief. According to Kemp, 61% do not believe in the apostle's creed and 57% strongly disagree that the Bible is literally true. Most tellingly, only 14% regard God as a 'real personality', while 27% regard God as an 'impersonal force.' Here, a broadening of the boundaries of spiritual significance exists alongside a wholesale move away from traditional Christian belief.

Turning to California, Lori Jensen (2000) offers a portrait of Committed Christian Fellowship, a conservative evangelical group populated by a curious mixture of youth subcultures, from punks to skinheads, surfers to hippies. While 'Committed' holds to a thoroughly conservative statement of faith – encompassing Biblical inerrancy, the rapture and the final judgement – the congregation adopts a 'relaxed' attitude towards subcultural difference. The clothes, behaviour, jargon and interests – in short the 'culture' – of punks are accepted as integral to the identities of the individuals in question, rather than socially unsuitable or morally suspect. In this way 'GenX' evangelicals are attempting to make up for the cultural prejudices of the mainstream church by fostering the subcultural peculiarities of the young.

Visions stands as a curious hybrid of these various developments: embracing the detraditionalisation of St James's, but not its hesitancy over a personal God; fostering

a place for the cultural outcast, like 'Committed', but without its ethical and religious conservatism; and following Tomlinson's call for creativity, like Cartledge's Independent church, but without its Biblical literalism. *Visions* shares with St James's a middle class membership, but its evangelical heritage prevents members from being able to fully and openly embrace the 'New Age'. (An internal document distances the group from practices like astrology and channelling, while accepting that New Agers are more open to the spiritual than secularists.) At the same time, its place within an evangelical tradition characterised by an embrace of the arts and an engagement with culture has encouraged the development of a subcultural identity, initially as a means to evangelism. Its rejection of conservative authority structures – as with many alt.worship groups – is in part due to an effort to distinguish itself from the power abuses of NOS and of the charismatic mainstream.

The reconfiguration of tradition which *Visions* offer is therefore influenced by factors of history and demography, and is not an unmediated capitulation to post-modern *bricolage*. Most important are its middle class, intellectual membership coupled with its perennial status as a marginalised fringe group within the shadow of a thriving mainstream evangelical church. Indeed, the latter ensures a connection with its history and spiritual home, while also serving as a focus of opposition and critique. Its evangelical heritage has also ensured that spiritual exploration has not veered into realms wholly detached from Christian spirituality, remaining rooted in a firm faith in divine immanence and the wisdom of scripture.

Conclusion

During fieldwork, I had a revealing conversation with an ex-member of the group, who spoke of the times when *Warehouse* were attempting to ‘cross the bridge’ into the culture of the night-clubbers. Although they always came back, she suggests that many of the group may have been more comfortable ‘on the other side’ all along. This captures the extent to which *Visions* have adapted and accommodated to a culture outside of the evangelical mainstream. In their early years this amounted to the dance culture, along with the equipment, records, clothes and subcultural markers that go with it. More recently, the ‘culture’ which serves as the benchmark of authenticity for the group amounts to a complex image of the post-modern, post-Christian west, which brings new challenges and fresh resources to the church. In many ways they are still exploring Graham Cray’s question of, “to what extent can a tradition re-embody its core values in a new cultural world?” The difference now is that an ‘incarnational mission’ has brought about a radical accommodation of values whereby traditional understandings of mankind, sin and the nature of salvation are subjected to reconfiguration. Engagement has evolved into emulation, though a broadening of the vision has been slow and liberalisation steady.

The patterns of innovation in *Visions* – and in alternative worship in general – are best captured by Dave Tomlinson’s concept of the ‘post-evangelical’. Tomlinson, similarly emerging out of a traditional evangelical background, argues that our post-modern culture leaves many people uncertain about whether they are able to commit wholly to traditions which endorse an explanation of reality that relies on a ‘grand narrative’. He rather suggests a vision of Christianity that emphasises an open and exploratory perspective, and which focuses on encouraging expressions of faith which are

personally authentic (Tomlinson, 1995: 58f.). His philosophy tallies well with the ethos of *Visions*, and his work is well known among some core members. In particular, his understanding of the pursuit of truth as an ongoing personal search for meaning reflects the understanding, within *Visions*, of faith as a journey. Both affirm process over closure, and personal authenticity over external criteria of legitimacy. Tomlinson's ideas are also instructive as a lens through which to analyse *Visions* because they highlight its dependency upon evangelical tradition. In moving away from evangelicalism, 'post-evangelicals', whether conscious of it or not, are also reliant upon it in the construction of a new identity.

But in what way does *Visions* participate in the processes discussed earlier with reference to St Michael's?

Liberalisation

I argued in chapter three that liberalisation has brought about a reconfiguration of the boundaries of tradition within St Michael's. While congregants adhere to traditional notions of salvation and of the centrality of the Bible, they have adopted liberal views on its interpretation, on women, and resist an exclusivist perspective on those outside of the faith. Within *Visions*, this process has gone further. They express an almost universalist perspective on salvation and embrace other sources of the spiritual. Members adopt a radically egalitarian perspective on women, and are sensitive to the point of adopting inclusivist language. The scriptures are peripheralised in services and members support a selective, critical approach to the texts, actually rejecting some Pauline teaching because of its offensive teaching on women and homosexuality.

But *Visions* embraces a ‘liberal’ outlook in a sense that moves beyond a mere broadening of boundaries and an increase in tolerance. The very process of liberalisation – in so far as this means an ongoing critical rethinking of tradition in the light of cultural change – is openly supported. As meaning is culturally conditioned, so expressions of faith and mission also need to change; indeed, they need to change in order to convey the same basic principles (Dawn, 1997). This is the theological argument. In terms of social values, such a radically enculturated approach arguably secures an ongoing diversification of beliefs.

But in addition to this, liberalisation within *Visions* has taken the form of a kind of *humanisation*. That is, a radical broadening of boundaries has undermined the importance of religious differences, inevitably leading to a focus upon humanity as the remaining common element. It is the human in people which is celebrated, fostered and afforded most respect, and which as such, acquires exceptional value and an almost religious nature (Durkheim, 1952: 336). This does not equate to a New Age self-spirituality (Heelas, 1996b), or to an individualistic ‘cult of man’ (Wallis, 1984: 58). But it amounts to an affirmation of human value as a component of a shared, complex belief system which has an omnipotent but immanent God at its centre. Most radically, it amounts to an appreciation of culture as essential to identity, and its sympathetic understanding as thus central to the Christian life.

Subjectivisation

While *Visions* have mostly now abandoned charismatic gifts, they do affirm a significant reliance upon subjective experience as a source of meaning. The description of the ‘Leaps of Faith’ service in chapter one reveals how personal

experience is conceived as foundational to the Christian life. But Rebecca Wilson's 'talk' on 'knowing when God is there' implies a much broader, less defined understanding of the spiritual element of subjectivity than that found in St Michael's. Moreover, while members might offer narrative accounts of their experiences of God within their daily lives, these accounts are heard far less frequently. There is less of a conviction in their significance for others and less uniformity in how they are formulated and understood.

It was noted in chapter four that the invocation of subjectivity in St Michael's is often focussed in privatised, personally-significant episodes, rather than public performance. This is also the case within *Visions*, members associating public expressions of significance with oppression and power abuse. But unlike St Michael's, these privatised incidents do not find their way into public discourse through the "ritualization of life" (Csordas, 1997). Within formal ritual, spoken discourse is downplayed and when present, is often abstract or liturgical, rather than demotic. In this sense, subjective experience still retains an importance among members, but is radically privatised. *Visions* services – their corporate expression of identity - rarely employ this kind of discourse, a trend that implies a belief in its limited significance as a feature of public worship. As professions of personal experience are associated with a charismatic smugness alienating to outsiders, it is not surprising to see it marginalised in this way. But more interestingly, this marginalisation appears to have seeped into the informal interaction of the core group itself. While important to individual members, the subjective experience of the divine is effectively excluded from their shared culture, a trend explored in more detail in chapter seven.

But while the affective discourse associated with subjective experience is distanced, *Visions* embrace a more radical subjectivisation in the way they prioritise the individual self. Their entire ethos revolves around catering to outsiders by offering experiences which may be received as personally and culturally authentic. A sense of meaning is contingent on whether something ‘works’ for the individual. Within this framework, rejection, disinvolvement and criticism are accepted as unproblematic. Former members are not begrudged for leaving, as this was “right for them at the time.” Subjective identity is accepted independent of one’s commitment to the group, so that legitimacy does not depend upon membership or conformity to a set of standards. Indeed, the imposition of standards is seen as an affront to subjectivity and to the authentic identities of individuals. A logical consequence of this is that the group have a relativist understanding of their outlook and projects; while their services may have meaning for some, they are acknowledged as equally alienating for others.

SUMMARY

In summary, *Visions* demonstrate an embrace of liberal ideas that is more extreme and more conscious than the same process in its parent church. They have moved beyond Hunter’s ‘ethic of civility’ – affirming not merely a civil attitude to outsiders but a genuine and necessary interest in their ideas, and a loving embrace of their humanity. But their tolerance has boundaries, excluding as it does the exclusivistic ideology that it projects onto charismatic evangelical tradition. This perception is grounded in past experiences, but is sustained as a constant nemesis in order that the boundaries of the group achieve greater meaning. Like Miller’s ‘new paradigm’, they acknowledge the need to be culturally relevant, but allow this engagement with culture to reconfigure their shared values. In so doing they have effectively abandoned their traditional

evangelical roots, in favour of a radically liberal, experimental ethos. They have willingly embraced postmodernity as the shifting ground of meaning that infuses their project with both relevance and plausibility.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SMALL GROUPS: THE EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY

“It should be a truly ‘family affair’ – a fellowship for all ages where we can learn more of God’s plan for our lives and where we can share together our personal needs and problems. God intends that every Christian should belong to a living, caring fellowship like this, where we don’t have to pretend we’re all super-saints. Far from it, we are ordinary folk with ordinary needs that ought to be shared. And if we don’t share them with other Christians, we shall no doubt have to put up with far heavier burdens than the Lord ever meant us to bear.”

(Revd David Watson, quoted in Saunders and Sansom, 1992: 112)

Introduction: Community and Belonging

After some time in the field I met June, an elderly parishioner who had joined the St Michael’s fellowship with her husband and two children in 1968. Her husband had since died and her children grown up and moved away. But she still attends St Michael’s regularly. After several meetings, she agreed to be interviewed and to share her thoughts about her time as a member of the church.

After recalling her memories of how the church has changed, especially in terms of its leaders and style of worship, she moves on to the subject of home groups. Home group fellowship has been central to church life since the 1970s, and June had led a large group with her husband in their own home for seven years. She emphasises how the group system has changed over the years, and is nostalgic for the time when home groups were a great source of intimacy, friendship and mutual support. She recalls how parishioners would be able to call on one another to borrow money, to ask for a lift when they were in a rush or the car had broken down, to be taken meals when ill in bed. There was a deep sense of trust and a spirit of giving, which she sees as fostered through the home group meeting. She still attends a home group, but is unsure about the charismatic style of its two leaders. “They are lovely people”, she says, “but they are into falling on the floor and shaking.” She says this is fine if the Holy Spirit moves

people in that way, but it has never moved her in this fashion. She is also a bit sceptical, as people may follow their example because of peer pressure rather than out of a genuine experience of the Spirit.

I ask her what the greatest value has been in being part of a home group? She answers, “Being in a small group where you can share your life, share your problems, talk more intimately, make relationships and close friendships.” In this she echoes the views of many older parishioners, who yearn for a close-knit community and strength of commitment that some feel is sorely lacking amongst the current congregation, especially among the young. I wonder whether June feels this way. She does say that there is less community these days, and less love in society. But she reassures me that there are still strong bonds within the St Michael’s congregation. “Why I stay now? I’ve been here so many years, it’s part of my life, it’s my family.”

Just before I moved away from York, around Easter 2000, I interviewed Emma. Emma had been a member of St Michael’s during the late 1980s while a student, and joined *Warehouse* with her boyfriend in the early 90s. She still attends *Visions* regularly and is regarded as one of the core group. After a nervous beginning she began to relax and eventually embarked on a passionate and detailed explanation of how the *Warehouse* group had developed as a distinct community.

She describes how, although the group emerged from a charismatic evangelical background, it does not want the culture that comes with this branch of the church.

Members wanted change, and this meant they had to be open-minded. But fostering an open forum of ideas led to in-group clashes, and strong personalities found that they profoundly disagreed with one another. Debate was passionate and I recall stories of slamming doors and angry confrontations. As Emma says, "...at one point everything was up for discussion and it was a whole new group and that's why it caused problems...everyone had their own opinions."

I wonder how they ever arrived at the laid-back, sedate attitude that they now so securely maintain. Emma explains this with reference to their strong sense of mutual commitment to one another and to a common project. "...I think that there is some very real commitment to each other as people, and you don't just blow each other out or have an argument if you're committed to someone, you sort it out, and I think that's what happened in the past..." She suggests that the mutual commitment among members over-rides any disagreement there might be between them. There are strong bonds of friendship and of a sense of common purpose, and these have secured an ongoing unity in spite of conflicts of attitude. "...there have been clashes, [but] it's been worked out and there is some...very real love, and there is very real community, and that is what has got us through any difficult [times]."

The Problem of Community

The enduring paradox of St Michael's and of *Visions* is that while both embody significant liberalisation, their members also affirm a strong sense of community identity. According to Peter Berger, religions which fare best in modern societies are those which foster homogeneity, solidarity among members and a clearly defined set of boundaries that set them apart from the outside world (Berger, 1969: 32; 1999). A

similar position is also argued by Stephen Warner (1988) and by Dean Kelley (1972). Steve Bruce, in a development of the same position, states that liberal religions cannot sustain themselves as the boundaries between them and the world are not demarcated with sufficient clarity (Bruce, 1989: 152-3). The analysis of shared beliefs in chapter three demonstrates that St Michael's is heavily liberalised, and expresses a significantly blurred impression of evangelical identity boundaries. And yet in speaking of why they continue to attend St Michael's, members consistently invoke the sense of belonging and experience of community that they achieve there. One parishioner's comment is typical: "...I have grown to love and appreciate the family of believers and I now feel a part of this family. I also believe that God wants me here."

The same paradox applies to the subjectivisation process. According to most commentators, the turn to the self and to the inner life engenders individualism and undermines the shared cohesion that is fostered by a reliance on external tradition (Bellah *et al*, 1985; Casanova, 1994; Durkheim, in Pickering, 1975; Heelas, 1996a). In other words, it undermines the possibilities of collective identity. As demonstrated in chapter four, the members of St Michael's embrace a heavily subjectivised approach to religious identity and, indeed, lean towards individualism in some respects. But at the same time many remain firmly committed to their church and to the importance of belonging to a community. As the two anecdotes cited above demonstrate, belonging to St Michael's and to *Visions* is associated with notions of family, of mutual support and of a common purpose. Membership is consistently made sense of in collective terms.

Of course, perceptions of ‘community’ by individuals do not necessarily signal the existence of a cohesive, close-knit collective. However, it is a common argument that the strength of a community depends upon the commitment of its members to its collective identity and to the projects which sustain that identity (Roof, 1978: 31). High levels of commitment to a common cause are a reliable gauge of social cohesion and thus of the kind of communal bonding which Peter Berger *et al* (1974) and Zygmunt Bauman (2001) see as increasingly unsustainable in the present cultural climate. I turn, therefore, to evidence of such commitment among the two groups.

Community and Commitment in St Michael’s

In reflection of evangelical tradition generally, the members of St Michael’s believe that the Christian life carries practical demands as well as a commitment of belief (Warner, 1988: 59). The most obvious context in which commitment is expressed is in Sunday services, and I have detailed in chapter three how well these are attended. Average attendances in 1999 were at 367, well above the national average (86) and much higher than the average for evangelical churches in Britain (97) (Brierley, 2000: 53). According to questionnaire data, 53% of the congregation regularly attend more than one service each week. The description of an evening service in chapter one illustrates the many opportunities for lay participation. Leadership roles are shared and different parishioners occupy different roles each week. Prayers are not only read but also composed by a different member at every service, thereby offering a channel of empowerment and opportunity for a public expression of personal values. 51% of the congregation have given a reading in church at some point.

The *Alpha* course offers further opportunities for involvement. Three courses are held each year and, in 2000, a new day-time course was established for those unable to attend in the evenings. According to our survey, 73% of the congregation have completed the course. More importantly, 16% have been a leader on an *Alpha* course at some point. 19% have functioned as a Christian helper, assuming a supportive role in discussion groups. Paradoxically, *Alpha* is less an index of successful evangelism and more an index of strong commitment and cohesion among existing members. Although total attendance on courses has seen a steady rise over five years (from 54 in 1995/6 to 113 in 1999/2000), helpers and existing Christians make up a large proportion of these numbers. According to internal church reports, only around 60% of participants usually complete *Alpha*, while conversations in the field suggested that a great number of St Michael's members have actually participated in the course several times. While outsiders are seeping through, there appears to be no shortage of lay evangelists, ready to take up the course for a second or third time.

According to the pastoral co-ordinator, around 63% of the church are involved in a home group. As suggested earlier on, these have a long history, originating in an initiative in the 1960s to foster Bible study, prayer and fellowship apart from Sunday worship. A by-product has been a strong community ethic and sense of moral and practical responsibility among members. Changes in the system over the past fifteen years have left the present network of home groups with a multitude of different arrangements, and the current policy is to leave established groups undisturbed rather than impose a new structure. Some groups are based around an area, drawing in parishioners living locally, other regular meetings are based on interest or gender. There is a men's group, a women's group, numerous general prayer meetings, and

each of the worship bands meet as a home group to rehearse and pray together. Each home group has around fifteen members, although regular attendance may average out at much lower than this. All centre on weekly Bible study and prayer, although some also incorporate sung worship and charismatic gifts. Questionnaire returns suggest that 67% of the congregation have led a home group meeting at some point; 45% pray in groups on a weekly basis. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that home groups are not as popular or as active as they were in the 1970s, participation is still a majority pursuit. The fact that a clear majority claim to have led meetings in the past suggests a strong ethic of shared lay leadership and of commitment to home groups across the congregation.

But practical commitment extends beyond the confines of church events, and informs the behaviour of individuals in 'secular' contexts. In particular, some individuals feel it their duty to speak about their faith to outsiders with a mind to bringing them to Christ. Evangelism is engaged in on an everyday basis, and the interrogative style of in-service conversation was noted in chapter one. 82% of the congregation have invited a friend to a St Michael's service at some point. 34% claim they have been responsible for someone new joining the church. However, it is important to note that not all members are equally comfortable with pressing an evangelical message onto their non-churchgoing friends. While many still invite colleagues and co-students, they often attempt to maintain a 'no pressure' approach, minimising conversionism while 'playing up' the less confrontational aspects of services such as sung worship. The 'gentility' discussed in chapter three is certainly evident in shared attitudes, especially among the young, who are conscious that in advancing invites to services they may fall foul of the 'pushy' Christian stereotype. But the urge to build up the

fellowship remains, if the methods employed to achieve this have become somewhat tempered.

Commitment to St Michael's is also expressed financially. I was told by the leadership that around one hundred members of the congregation regularly 'covenant', giving a large proportion – perhaps 10% - of their income. According to the questionnaire survey, 42% of the congregation donate 9% or more of their gross income each month. The accuracy of this figure is of course subject to the honesty of congregants although, during fieldwork, there were other clear signs that financial giving is high. According to the Annual Finance Report, in 1999-2000 the total unrestricted income of the church was £404,000. £368,949 of this was listed as 'voluntary income'. £80,000 alone was raised at the annual 'Gift Day', a sum earmarked for the church hall renovations. Taking the 2000 address list as an index of membership, these figures amount to an average annual donation of almost £500 per parishioner. Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that the distribution of donations is skewed: some parishioners – especially those registered with the 'covenanting' system – donate a lot more than others. However, these exceptionally high figures alone are sufficient enough to demonstrate the generally high degree of financial commitment within St Michael's. A report by the Archbishops' Council on Evangelism (ACE) in 1977 claimed that, when corrected in take account of inflation, levels of giving in St Michael's were actually falling (Saunders and Sansom, 1992: 143f.). The available figures are inconclusive, but a comparison of average levels of giving per parishioner in the early 70s with levels in the late 1990s suggests that, in real terms, financial giving has significantly declined.

The members of St Michael's express their commitment to its mission and evangelical identity through high attendances, consistent and time-consuming practical effort, and substantial financial sacrifice. By its own standards, there are certainly signs of depression; fewer home groups, generally lower attendances, levels of financial giving lower in real terms, possibly fewer outreach projects. And yet this remains a church that elicits significantly high degrees of commitment from its members, on a level that is unheard of in most Anglican circles.

Community and Commitment in Visions

As it operates on such a smaller scale, the practical commitment expressed by the core group of *Visions* is channelled through far fewer institutionalised contexts. However, it is no less striking. Core members generally commit up to five hours each Sunday to the planning and organisation of their service. It takes up to an hour just to pack away the group's technical equipment, and the sophistication of the gadgetry often makes this a delicate business. And this is quite apart from the extensive planning that goes into arranging and resourcing each service.

In addition to this, the group meet at least once a week for their small group meeting. This may be a Bible study, prayer session, discussion or service planning meeting, and these are held either in a member's home or else in a favourite local pub or café. Core members attend every week, subject to family and work commitments. My time with the group revealed that several members committed far more time than this to their ongoing projects. Some could be reasonably labelled 'workaholics', and spend their evenings and weekends engaged in photography, computer generated imagery, or sound production, much of which is intended for use at *Visions* events.

Several members are also committed to outside projects which they feel reflect group values. Daniel invests a great deal of time in a local Credit Union initiative, devoted to facilitating finance among needy friends on fair terms. Four other core members are involved in a joint project with a local caterer and concert venue, to open an ‘Ambient Café’ within the city of York. Built on the principles of friendship evangelism (see chapter six), Emma describes the project as “evangelism with a small ‘e’ – very low key, people oriented.” The aim is to offer a ‘safe’ space for young people to be during the evenings, offering warmth and people to chat to; an extension of Christian outreach in practical terms. This is a group who are strikingly committed to a set of shared values, to the point where they consider it a lifestyle rather than a weekly vocation. In this way, commitment to the principles of the group is not restricted to projects sponsored by the group alone. Other agencies are drawn in, as partners in a broad vision of reform and social action.

This sense of a lifestyle captures the way in which *Visions* interweave their Christian values into their daily lives as individuals. Members regularly meet as close friends outside of ‘official’ meetings, and some have shared houses in the past. They share practical resources such as their cars, and allow the planning of group projects and discussion of group ideas to extend into daily conversational exchange. Their lives as husbands, wives, computer programmers, music fans and wine enthusiasts are inextricably bound up in their identity as a Christian collective. They do these things together just as they worship together. This contrasts with St Michael’s, whose members – while dedicated to the church – channel this dedication into a specific series of meetings. Their time is segmented so as to distinguish church and non-church pursuits, in a way which simply does not happen among *Visions* members. (It is also

worth mentioning that financial commitment among the *Visions* group – expressed through convenanting to St Michael’s – is, according to anecdotal evidence, of a fairly high level.)

While the commitment of core group members is vividly worked out in their everyday lives, it is worth noting that they generally fail in their efforts to draw in new members. The size of the group has gradually shrunk over the last ten years; committed members have left because of disagreements or moves away from the area and fewer have taken their place and stayed. Moreover, most peripheral participants do not attend small group, take part in the planning and setting up of services or mix with core members outside of services. The commitment that is so passionately expressed is restricted to a very small group of individuals, who struggle attracting others into their ongoing project.

Summary

I have established that the members of both St Michael’s and *Visions* invest a great deal in their respective Christian communities. These are Christians who embrace a religious identity which absorbs a large portion of their time, and creates channels of practical activity in the name of the Gospel. This inevitably helps to forge strong bonds of friendship and effective support networks among the congregation. Members tend to meet with other parishioners outside of church, and some see St Michael’s as the centre of their social as well as religious life. However, the church do not show the same general degree of cohesion as the *Visions* group. For example, only 25% say that all five of their closest friends are also members of St Michael’s; 22% say that none of their five closest are St Michael’s members. 8% even say that none are Christians.

Thus, while levels of commitment appear to be high, St Michael's fails to encourage hard social boundaries around its membership.

But we are still left with the paradox outlined at the beginning of this chapter – how are high levels of commitment squared with significant liberalisation? The case of the *Visions* group complicates matters, for it manifests a related, and yet distinct, liberal development, while failing to draw in new members in the way that St Michael's does. I wish to explore this problem in a way which extends the arguments offered in chapters four and five. I argued that St Michael's maintains a collective sense of common identity through an insidious control of public discourse which tends to marginalise fragmenting forces and paper over perceived tensions. The management of the subjective also involves the public expression of shared problems, mainly to do with the struggles of a life of faith (e.g. in words of knowledge). These mechanisms would seem to depend upon a marked division of public and private discourses. My interest in this chapter is in how a sense of 'community' is sustained among smaller gatherings of parishioners, where this division is less easily achieved. This focus allows a direct comparison with the *Visions* group, which in turn allows for comparison of how patterns of liberalisation and subjectivisation are filtered within small group contexts among the two factions. As a way in to this problem, it will be useful to refer to the work of Penny Becker, and to her recent study of conflict management and resolution among American religious communities, *Congregations in Conflict* (1999).

Family and Community Congregations

Within her typology of different kinds of congregation, Becker distinguishes between ‘family’ and ‘community’ congregations. While both foster ‘family-like’ connections, and thus mobilise mutual support networks among members (Becker, 1999: 65), there are also important differences. Family congregations, according to Becker, stress doctrinal unity for the sake of cohesion and an experience of togetherness as a church ‘family’ (Becker, 1999: 86-7). Community congregations, by contrast, emphasise the importance of providing a context in which members may express their individuality. They stress the need for the congregation as an institution to adjust to the needs of its members (Becker, 1999: 109). The first plays down difference for the sake of unity and conformity to an established religious and moral order, the second de-emphasises sameness in favour of accommodating the different needs of individuals within the community.

This distinction bears some similarity to the differences between the kinds of community offered by St Michael’s and *Visions*. Chapter four emphasised how a pervasive liberalisation among the St Michael’s congregation is nevertheless veiled through the control of public discourse. Public teaching plays down those differences likely to provoke conflict in order to sustain a sense of essential doctrinal unity. By contrast, the radical individualisation positively embraced by the *Visions* group has developed hand in hand with an understanding of community as that which nurtures personal needs, in all their inevitable diversity. Here, community is conceived as a place where the cultural outcast is welcomed and their difference affirmed as legitimate. This is not merely a distinction between ‘right belief and ‘right’ practice, but signals two alternative ways in which each is put in the service of the other. In St

Michael's, an established model of values is sustained by a process of policing the boundaries of shared discourse and group practice. In *Visions*, group practice is policed so as to minimise any outward appearance of embracing any orthodoxy. Both rely upon controlling dominant norms of interaction, and both require a certain degree of shared value. But while St Michael's demands the public appearance of a (limited) uniformity of belief, *Visions* fosters (and also requires) the public appearance of heterodoxy.

Becker's approach to community is to examine the ways in which the demands put on members reflect a common ideology or value system. This dialectic inevitably shapes in-group interaction while at the same time producing the conditions for the maintenance and development of shared beliefs. Her emphasis upon the practical outworking of values offers a useful method for exploring value change. In focussing upon the interaction between the functions of local community and group attitudes, she offers a corrective to Berger's failure to take account of mediating structures. Berger (1969; Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974) assumes a straightforward relationship between social structure and belief. In so doing he fails to account for "...the different empirical relationships between the contents of socialization and different social structural configurations..." (Wuthnow *et al*, 1984: 71)

I will take up Becker's theoretical approach in an analysis of the use of the small group, which has been essential to the development of a culture of values within both St Michael's and *Visions*. My emphasis will be upon how patterns of value are legitimated or challenged within each group and on how the family and community models described above are sustained.

Small groups have achieved a central place within the evangelical subculture in recent years (Bebbington, 1989: 242-244; Hall, 1994; Steven, 1999), especially among charismatic churches (Francis, Lankshear and Jones, 2000). They generate new conditions for the negotiation of identities while offering contexts for mutual care and support (Walter, 1995). However, little work has been done on the nature and significance of the UK movement. In exploring this phenomenon, it is necessary to look to the US literature, and to the sociologist Robert Wuthnow's recent empirical study.

Wuthnow on Small Groups

In *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*, Wuthnow analyses the burgeoning small group movement in the USA. Addressing a broad variety of issues, from Alcoholics Anonymous to Charismatic prayer groups, people are increasingly turning to small support groups for a sense of belonging and meaning in life.

Wuthnow argues that small groups have been so successful in North America because they reflect trends already embedded in wider society. In particular, small groups cater for the socially and geographically mobile, by encouraging alliances that are not expected to be permanent. They provide "a kind of social interaction that busy, rootless people can grasp without making significant adjustment to their lifestyles. [They] allow...bonding to remain temporary." (Wuthnow, 1996: 25) In other words, small groups cater to the needs of 'elective parochials', i.e. those socially and geographically mobile individuals who, uprooted from their original homes, re-create community relationships *via* temporary allegiances and secondary institutions (Tipton,

1982; Warner, 1988). In this way small groups have been claimed as a response to the “discontents of modernity” (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974: 183; Heelas and Woodhead, 2000).

Wuthnow also focuses on the ways in which small groups shape the religious identities of participants. First, in fostering weak commitments rather than demanding lasting allegiances, small groups tend to bind members by only the weakest of social contracts. Active participation becomes optional, attendance subject to convenience, and this demands a tolerance of personal differences. A consequence of this is that, rather than foster community as such, small groups may merely “provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others” (Wuthnow, 1996: 6). Their tendency to focus on emotional support over offering specific, directed advice also adds to this emphasis upon personal affirmation and rules out the suggestion that individuals should radically change in order to enter the group. “Caring for someone is more likely to be defined by this norm as not criticising them rather than as trying to help them come to a different understanding.” (Wuthnow, 1996: 14) Small groups thus tend to embody a kind of ‘ethic of civility’ (Hunter, 1987), as well as an insidious religious individualism. They encourage tolerance of difference and in so doing add weight to the notion that everyone has their own religious identity which should be respected (Taylor, 1991: 28-9).

Second, in so far as small groups redefine relations between people, they also have a tendency to generate redefinitions of the sacred (Wuthnow, 1996: 17-19). Particularly, a frequent lack of formal leadership or institutionalised oversight means that the negotiation of religious themes proceeds according to the needs and impulses of

ordinary members. Small group discussions have the propensity to channel individual subjectivities into heterodox statements of belief which are left unchecked by religious authorities. As Wuthnow comments,

“Group members can attribute authority to anything that fits readily with their own experience, including the affirming words of friends in their group. This new focus...can significantly trivialize the nature of divine wisdom and authority.”
(Wuthnow, 1996:102)

Wuthnow’s concern is that, left unsupervised by religious institutions, small groups can become ‘seedbeds of heresy’. Participants are left to attribute authority and spiritual significance to whatever they feel is important, constructing deviant ‘subterranean theologies’ (Martin, 1967) which are esoteric or individualist, rather than conforming to established tradition. Wuthnow of course has his own Christian agenda, but he does raise an important point. That is, by functioning apart from consistent and institutionalised traditions of leadership and organisation, small groups open up the possibilities for innovations in belief. The propensity for unchecked exploration is compounded by several other factors. The emphasis upon affirmation over judgement, discussed earlier, tends to discourage individuals from criticising others openly at group meetings. The sharing of a common language and subculture – which is a by-product of small groups attracting people from similar social backgrounds – means that group norms often remain implicit and unchallenged. And, in reflection of other movements in contemporary evangelical religion – not least the Christian counselling movement – small groups tend to assume a model of learning based on mutual interaction rather than didactic teaching. Knowledge is not that which already exists, “to be transmitted to an audience of learners by someone in authority”; it is rather “something to be generated by the group itself through discussing the personal views of its individual members.” (Wuthnow, 1996: 43) According to Wuthnow, while small groups offer a positive source of emotional support and self-

affirmation, they also tend to loosen the boundaries of tradition and engender heterodox enclaves among like-minded believers. Moreover, such groups may become entrenched in their heterodoxy as a result of not having to answer challenges from outside of their membership.

Wuthnow's analysis is limited to the USA, and his focus upon expressive individualist strands of the movement suggests an insufficient coverage of those groups seeking to resist dominant modern trends, not to mention small groups within non-Christian traditions. But while his findings cannot be simply translated into the UK context, several of his observations have a clear application within contemporary UK evangelicalism. In particular, his stress upon affirmation over judgement and mutual support mechanisms reflects movements of subjectivisation charted in chapters two and five. Moreover, the notion that small groups stand as a response to increased social mobility raises important questions about the 'elective parochials' of St Michael's. On a theoretical level, he explores how the form of a communal gathering shapes the ways values are affirmed and challenged in group interaction, thus echoing Becker's concerns raised earlier on. For present concerns, Wuthnow provides a framework for asking just what kinds of possibilities are opened up and sustained by small groups in terms of value negotiation and intra-personal patterns of commitment.

Having mapped out the key theoretical concerns of this chapter, I will now turn once more to an analysis of the available data. I will in turn discuss the place of small groups within the life of the St Michael's fellowship and the *Visions* group, focusing on processes of identity negotiation in each. A final section will compare the two

groups, offering explanations of how patterns in group behaviour reflect patterns of commitment and growth.

Small Groups in St Michael's

While only 63% of the congregation are currently members of a home group, small group gatherings are also fostered through youth meetings, staff prayer, the *Alpha* course and the monthly church prayer meeting. It is fair to say that the majority of St Michael's members take part in small groups on a regular basis, as a focus for spirituality and a context for forging close bonds among other parishioners. A good example is '20s', a group established as a large regular gathering of young parishioners – including several future *Visions* members - which achieved a membership of 43 in 1990. Revd David White disbanded the group as part of his effort to streamline home groups according to geographical area. However, as one former member informed me, participants so valued their regular meetings as a peer group that some continued to meet informally as a home group. The perceived value of the group was so great that it continued outside official church boundaries, a sure signal of strong mutual bonds and a need for continued fellowship with familiar friends.

During fieldwork, I attended numerous home group meetings, although the following analysis will focus on my experiences with what began as an *Alpha* course discussion group, meeting weekly on Thursday evenings. I began attending the St Michael's *Alpha* course in October, 1999, and was allocated a place in a group in which to discuss the issues raised by the weekly speaker. Initially, the group numbered thirteen, six males and seven females. Four were St Michael's members (including the group

leaders, a husband and wife), four who were unsure about why they had come along, three who felt marginal yet positive towards Christianity, one fresh from a conversion experience and myself. The four 'unsure' members dropped out after one week but the rest of the group remained consistent. After nine Thursday meetings – during which most of the prescribed themes in the *Alpha* literature were covered (see Gumbel, 2001; Hunt, 2001) - members of the group were asked if they would like to continue as an '*Alphalink*' group, meeting at the leaders' home. *Alphalink* is a scheme designed by Holy Trinity, Brompton as a continuation course for *Alpha* 'graduates' and stepping stone to local church membership. It also follows a prescribed literature (Gumbel, 1994) and was transposed in St Michael's into the general home group structure, as a kind of half-way house between *Alpha* attendance and a full commitment to the St Michael's fellowship. Aside from one group member who left to work abroad, all remaining members agreed to this, and I attended a further six weekly sessions. Five more St Michael's members joined this group, making an end total of thirteen again, although average weekly attendance throughout was more like ten.

Although the *Alphalink* sessions were far more structured than the earlier post-teaching gatherings, the majority of time was still spent in discussion. We would spend the first fifteen minutes or so chatting informally, pray, read through the set Biblical text (usually a passage of about ten verses, read out aloud by a volunteer), and then engage in group dialogue. The group leader would typically pose questions for the group – why is baptism not enough to make us confident before God? should we show the same concern for non-Christians as we do to Christians? - and wait for our responses. Questions were supposed to relate to the set text, and to a key theme raised by it: responsibility, friendship or generosity, for example. From the outset, no one

was questioned directly and discussion remained thoroughly non-confrontational. A silent opening would often be picked up by one of the St Michael's members, who would attempt to steer the discussion according to their convictions on the issue. In this way the 'leader' adopted a non-intrusive role, setting the agenda and overseeing proceedings, rather than teaching or claiming any religious authority. Participants engaged in sessions in a relaxed and informal manner, and demonstrated their commitment to learning by bringing along their own Bibles, and making written notes during discussion.

The consistent presence of individuals who were hesitant or unsure about Christianity meant that questions were occasionally challenging, and discussions revealed a great deal about where members felt the boundaries of belief should lie, as well as revealing how diversity or conflict are sometimes dealt with. Sessions were both informal and friendly throughout, and participants grew to trust one another more as friends as time progressed. This meant that discussion was increasingly relaxed and by the end of the fifteen week period, most earlier traces of reticence had gone, as members appeared to freely and honestly contribute to group debate.

Given their evangelistic subtext, sessions were generally focussed upon Christian 'essentials', especially the necessity and meaning of salvation. However, the way in which these issues were addressed displayed some resemblance to the reticence and civility discussed in chapter four. In this respect, group discourse was often notable for what it did not utter, rather than what it did. Even in these contexts of evangelism – in which full conversion of non-Christians is openly promoted as an end goal – there was a curious skirting around the issues. The shared liberalism discussed in chapter

four appears to have infiltrated norms of interaction with outsiders, as well as that between members of the church.

Tolerating Difference

The evangelical tone of the *Alpha* literature very much shaped the discourse of sessions – both through its recommended ‘questions for discussion’ and in the subliminal way in which St Michael’s advocates reiterated its substantive emphases and styles of expression. Indeed, Nicky Gumbel, curate of Holy Trinity, Brompton and author of much of the *Alpha* literature, was soon incorporated into discussion as an authority, and his writings and persona were invoked as signifying sound Christian wisdom.

Given the mixed membership of the group – evangelicals, non-evangelical Christians and non-Christians – one might expect a degree of disagreement among participants. However, any disagreement that did arise was quickly defused, either made sense of as a positive sign of Christian diversity or else evaded and glossed over quickly before any sense of dissonance could be openly registered. A sense of dissonance was clearly evident, but I soon began to see that it was largely suppressed, subject to a carefully placed diplomacy. Most striking during my time with the group was the reluctance on the part of participants to offer any kind of clear judgement that might have alienated anyone there. Tolerance, alongside gentle urges in the ‘right’ direction, formed the defining but unstated group ethic.

Pre-empting one source of disagreement, one participant – a St Michael’s member – stated that it is important to be obedient to one’s calling. Some are called to be

vegetarians, but he had not been, therefore it was acceptable for him to eat meat. In other words, God chooses different paths for different servants, and this diversity goes some way towards explaining differences of opinion within the Christian camp. Another participant – a young woman with a Roman Catholic background – shared her concerns about Christians she had met who would not listen to the radio for fear of being corrupted by the mention of sex. She saw this as ridiculous, and there was some agreement amongst the group. However, one St Michael's member openly affirmed the importance of tolerance in this case. These ideas may seem ridiculous to us, but we should not judge these people. They might see things differently in the Bible – and that's OK for them - but it is important not to judge others, despite our differences. She added the caveat that, as long as the 'fundamentals' are there, then that's OK. However, these 'fundamentals', though affirmed, were not defined, maintaining, if anything, a sense of relationship and relational commitment rather than any doctrinal focus.

Any kind of judgement voiced and directed at a member of the group was notable for its subtlety and muted expression and, tellingly, such occasions only arose when fundamental boundaries of the evangelical church were being undermined. For example, during group discussion, one young woman stated her conviction that there was no dissonance between her faith in God and her faith in astrology. Questionnaire data suggests that there is passionate opposition to alternative spiritual practices amongst St Michael's congregants, a tendency not untypical among evangelicals (Saliba, 1999: 40). 75% view mediumship as 'evil', a figure that is 72% for tarot reading, 72% for paganism and 87% for witchcraft. However, this remark within small group prompted a relatively lukewarm suggestion that should this woman put

her whole faith in God, then she would not need to rely on astrology. She quickly restated her position, claiming that she would not delve into it again, thus conforming to the position by then established as ‘acceptable’.

However, another member of the group – a young professional who had recently had a conversion experience – suggested to me afterwards that he had felt a discernible pressure at that point to “say the right thing”, i.e. to toe the party line that astrology is simply wrong and misguided. He would rather have discussed matters further and in more depth, and thought that some of the other members felt the same. His comments were telling, in that his reticence suggested a simultaneous awareness of the complexity of the issues addressed and yet a conscious reluctance to shift the discussion to take these complexities into account. He explained this in terms of a felt pressure within the group to conform to a particular viewpoint. While the implicit ethic of the group emphasised affirmation and gentle guidance over judgement, it also achieved conformity *via* repressing certain kinds of criticism or debate. A ‘repressive tolerance’ (Marcuse, 1969) was thus not only implied in conversational exchange, but was also felt by peripheral participants as a norm of interaction that was dominant and imposed by the St Michael’s members. Indeed, it was by gently encouraging capitulation to a dominant discourse that the group collectively sustained a tolerance of the ‘right kind’.

The shaping principle of group conduct appeared to favour the assertion of boundaries between Christian and non-Christian, but only if the anomaly raised could not be reasonably incorporated into a vision of Christian diversity. For example, the group could acknowledge Christians who did not profess second birth, as well as the fact of

variety in prayer and worship; they could not tolerate the ‘New Age’. As group members were from a fairly limited range of social backgrounds, and several shared the same worldview, no contributions were seriously outlandish. Moreover, as the vision of Christianity embraced was also fairly broad (see chapter four), there were few occasions when a definition of something as inalienably ‘other’ was necessary. Effectively, the small group achieved a sense of agreement and unity in spite of the ideological diversity of its membership, and in so doing fostered a non-threatening, affirming environment. While participants claimed that those who are ‘born again’ naturally “gel together”, they did not dwell too long on the substance of this linkage lest these ties unravel and threaten the sense of cohesion otherwise maintained.

Legitimising Member Identities

While offering a tolerant and affirming environment to its members, this small group also served as a context for the positive legitimation of member ideas and a shared sense of status. By bestowing leadership roles onto lay congregants, for example, meetings fostered significant occasions of empowerment, as ‘ordinary’ parishioners were given the opportunity to lead worship, prayers and discussion, and to define key questions; in other words - within accepted boundaries - to set the agenda. Open discussion also allowed individuals to affirm their spiritual status by providing a channel for stories of conversion, spiritual awakening and the movement of God within the fabric of one’s daily life. Taking up the argument in chapter five, small groups provide further opportunities for the “ritualization of life” (Csordas, 1997), as heightened spiritual experiences migrate into everyday life *via* narratives voiced in group contexts. If the charismatic worldview allows for the generation of subjective moments of significance, small groups facilitate their conversion into ‘spiritual

capital' (Bourdieu, 1977) as co-members provide a polite and affirming audience. One woman in particular, after giving a moving testimony in church, was received with an enthusiastic respect within the group meeting. Other participants quizzed her about her experiences and she responded with further developments of her own story. In this way she embodied what was interpreted as "spiritual maturity". Her status was affirmed through the narrative tales she shared with the group, their merit substantiated by a dual connectedness with Biblical texts and with life experiences shared by other members (Wuthnow, 1996: 312).

In addition to legitimising any sense of personal spiritual status, small group meetings served as a site for the legitimation of existing beliefs and convictions. Wuthnow (1996) suggests that small groups can engender an insidious conservatism. This is especially the case when members originate from similar social or religious backgrounds, and thus embrace similar beliefs, values or social conventions. Existing prejudices tend to be re-affirmed rather than challenged, as the group rarely has to deal with elements that are alien to its social constituency. Within the *Alphalink* sessions, the values affirmed were often bound up in norms of lifestyle or respectability associated with the middle class identities of participants.

For example, while by no means affirming a prosperity Gospel in the 'name it and claim it' tradition (Coleman, 2000), members were keen to defend economic advancement as a positive achievement, endorsed by God. This was especially striking during a discussion of the 'kenosis' passage in Paul's letter to the Philippians, which was addressed *via* the topic of ambitiousness. The group was challenged with the question: is it right to be ambitious? The text itself condemns selfish ambition,

and encourages humility, in no uncertain terms: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” (Philippians, 2: 3) Nicky Gumbel’s guidebook expands on this (as if anticipating the concerns of his middle class, Knightsbridge audience), arguing that there is nothing wrong with ambition in itself, so long as it is subordinated to the will of God. He substantiates this with a quotation, not from the Bible, but from a book by John Stott, the leading evangelical writer and preacher (Gumbel, 1994: 44). One is reminded of the criticism that *Alpha* conflates middle class conventions with Biblical teaching (Ward, 1998).

Group discussion followed the *Alpha* line, and the notion of “honouring God in your job” was banded around as a positive principle. As one group leader claimed, “God wants us to do well, and excel in our jobs.” There was some sense of ethical boundary – we ought to “play by the rules” – but this was a vague and undefined notion, which thereby blurred distinctions between Biblical and corporate standards of practice. There was even evidence of a conflation of corporate and theological language. One woman emphasised how it was important to “know who your boss is”. She had done quite well as she “works for the Lord”. As if to confirm the legitimacy of her lifestyle, she then went on to tell how the Lord had looked after her by giving her a new office at work. The idea that God rewards the faithful through occupational advancement was openly endorsed by several other group members.

It could be surmised that the underlying themes of the *Alpha* literature and the participants’ own support for ambition as a human quality are driven by the same factor, i.e. the preservation of middle class social values and a reluctance to challenge the *status quo*. It is not insignificant that all of those present at this meeting were

financially comfortable and many had lucrative careers with future prospects. In this respect it is perhaps not surprising that the group did not linger over issues of the ethics of capitalism, fair trade or the inequalities of opportunity within a western economy, even when discussing themes such as love, humility, and ‘putting others before oneself’. To take a rather cynical perspective, Christianity becomes appropriated in a way that avoids inconveniencing its members, a tolerance that carries some resemblance to contemporary consumerism. As David Lyon sardonically puts it, quoting from Henry Mair, “Jesus comes dressed up in the clothes of our own culture.” (Lyon, 2000: 137) Moreover, in St Michael’s this trend is made possible by the way in which personal experience is viewed as a sound basis from which to prove the meaning or significance of a certain Biblical passage (Wuthnow, 1996: 279) (see chapter four). In these cases, experience draws in social convention as a factor in the authenticating process.

Mutual Support

The small group was also used as a context for the provision of a more personal, emotional support. Given that several members of our *Alpha* group were fairly new to the church and to one another, meetings were not generally characterised by the kind of personal and emotional confidences one might expect in a more established, closely-knit group (Walter, 1995). Consequently, in one sense, the “intimacy, support and sharing” emphasised by Wuthnow was here quite muted (Wuthnow, 1994: 52). However, the sentiments of personal support that ground these processes were still present. Indeed, given the infancy of our collective as a regularly meeting group, I was surprised at how easily members slipped into a mode of interaction that stressed the sharing of personal problems within relationships of clear mutual trust. Several

members were young, single and new to the area, and the small group allowed them to forge close friendships with others of a like-mind, before they moved on to new jobs or university courses. The style of the group was well-suited to ‘elective parochials’, who were especially attracted to the sense of warmth and empathy offered within this ‘family’ congregation (Becker, 1999: 96).

A sense of intimacy and support was transmitted in the general interactive style of the group – the informal mood of meetings, punctuated with light humour, soon gave way to the sharing of personal problems and experiences. Members openly made requests for advice, others freely offered it, and conversations before, after and during meetings covered a variety of topics. There was an overall sense of relaxed informality, and this appeared to overrule any degree of structure which was lightly imposed by the group leaders. The comments participants made in relating why they enjoyed group meetings all stressed an experience of community associated with open discussion and a warm and nurturing environment. It was the very act of meeting and sharing that was primarily significant, rather than any experience of ‘learning the faith’ through doctrine, texts or moral values.

But it was in ritualised acts of group prayer that dynamics of mutual support were most directly and vividly mobilised. Each meeting was framed by prayer, with an opening petition, spoken by the leader, asking God to open our hearts to His word. The closing prayers were more lengthy and took the form of a group exercise, with petitioners taking turns to lead. The following description, adapted from field notes, provides a typical example.

Sitting in a circle, with heads bowed, we conclude the session with prayer, and John performs the ritual of asking the group if there are any issues people would like prayed about. Requests are many and varied. Stephanie mentions what a bad time she has had this month whilst on her period. John suggests we pray about Rachel, a former Alpha participant who has just moved abroad with a new job. Graham suggests prayer for James, the St Michael's pastoral co-ordinator, recently out of hospital with a back complaint. Barbara wishes to pray for her friend Sam, who has lost both his father and brother in law within a very short space of time. Sam is especially sad as he is unsure whether his father came to "know the Lord" before his death. All of these issues, and more, are prayed about over a period of continuous prayer lasting about ten minutes. Four members of the group take turns to pray out loud (although no order is agreed beforehand) while the rest of us sit in silence. John, the group leader, both begins and ends the prayer. Interestingly, although all of these issues are addressed – from comfort in physical recovery to solace in bereavement – all are addressed by participants other than the people who requested them. A symbolic display of altruism and common support is thus spontaneously affirmed. Sarah prays for Barbara's friend Sam, saying that she hopes his father came to know the Lord in some way, even if he didn't know it, and that Sam would be given a sign that this has occurred.

(adapted from fieldnotes, 20/01/00)

This intercessory prayer emphasises the importance bestowed upon taking account of personal concerns, and of praying for them as a group. The themes prayed for are mundane, everyday worries, particular to the lives of the individuals present, and this heightens a sense of genuine personal concern and care extended within and by the group. But these prayers were not followed up at later sessions; confirmation was not explicitly sought. Individuals would say when prayers had been answered, and if they

had not, this did was never thought to challenge the legitimacy of the exercise. The stress here was upon the communal support that performing such prayer provides. The sheer act of praying makes members aware of one another's problems and in so doing - as with the 'words of knowledge' discussed in chapter five - serves as an indirect channel for advice and mutual care (Wuthnow, 1996: 241).

On some occasions this extended into a more emotionally charged episode of personal empowerment, encouraged through prayer by the laying on of hands. During one session, one participant started to weep during prayers. As she broke down explaining her personal worries, several other participants spontaneously laid on hands and embraced her. The leader then prayed again, this time for her in particular. He focussed upon affirmation (thanking God for her), renewal (asking God to fill her with His Spirit), and understanding (acknowledging that life is not easy, but asking God to show Himself to her). She could clearly depend upon the session as a source of support in a difficult time, and showed considerable trust in the participants present, some of whom she had only met a few weeks earlier.

The small groups of St Michael's are clearly a site for the extension of mutual support among the congregation: a discursive affirmation of social identities and an expressive affirmation amounting to emotional support. Shared expectations of 'fellowship' have clearly come to encompass what Steven Tipton (1982) has called a "therapeutic understanding of spirituality", i.e. the congregation and its religious life is, at least in part, focused on meeting individual emotional and psychological needs (Becker, 1999: 146). Although not all participants use them in this way, this is an accepted function of the small group. As Wuthnow comments, small groups give spirituality a "pragmatic flavour by focussing on specific needs and the resolution of those needs".

In so doing, they embed spirituality in the “relational character of the group...In the caring they experience from one another, members are convinced that their prayers have been heard.” (Wuthnow, 1996: 242)

Small Group in Visions

“Small group meetings are times for us to be together regularly in order to deepen our relationships with each other in God. We expect to do this in praying and playing, and by exploring different ways of expressing our corporate relationship with God. When we are together, we want to listen to each other with respect, to challenge each other through study and discussion, and to draw from each other’s creative gifts and acquired skills.”

(from in-group document, *What is Warehouse Small Group?*, dated 1/11/96)

As detailed in the previous chapter, *Visions* developed out of a small group venture: the semi-academic discussions of the Monday Night Group. Since then they have articulated their vision of the ‘small group’ as an aspect of their shared mission and as a self-conscious alternative to ‘mainstream’ versions. Echoing Becker’s ‘community congregations’ (Becker, 1999), this vision has focussed on the need to offer a safe and affirming context for the expression of spiritual identities, regardless of their deviation from the evangelical norm. While *Alphalink* is ostensibly oriented towards the secular unconverted, *Visions* small group is oriented towards the waifs and strays on the margins of mainstream evangelicalism.

The core group have always held weekly small group meetings, typically as a time for prayer, Bible study, discussion and service planning. All meetings are held in members’ houses except for service planning, which is frequently convened at a favourite local pub or café. One local venue is particularly suited to the values of the group – a vegetarian tapas bar which supports free-trade goods. It is managed by a woman who, while not a Christian herself, is sympathetic to Christian values, and to the ethos of the *Visions* group in particular. Group members are regular patrons and

even used the venue for their millennium New Year's Eve party, a symptom of how the group lives out a blurring of the boundaries between 'church' and 'secular' contexts.

Small group has always played a key part in the life of *Visions*, serving as a context for 'business planning meetings' (BPMs), and as a welcome regular gathering of like-minded friends. Some core members even regard small group, rather than Sunday services, as the centre of the group's life as a Christian collective. In part, this is because the intimacy afforded by small groups suits those who find larger church gatherings impersonal and alienating. But it also reflects their need for a place to talk, share concerns and build on a sense of community. Most core members go along to every weekly meeting, although peripheral participants (see chapter six) rarely attend. In this way, the small group marks out the boundaries of the core group more clearly than any of their other projects, and effectively consolidates the close bonds shared between members.

At the time of my fieldwork, the group had established a rotational system whereby each form of meeting was held roughly once a month. In practice, this meant that prayer meetings, service planning and social occasions such as barbecues or wine tasting occurred on a regular basis, but Bible study less so. No explanation was offered for this, apart from the immediate practical needs of the group and the fluctuating extent to which core members were able and willing to prepare and lead sessions.

One other kind of meeting was held regularly, less open to neglect because it was organised and led by an outsider. These were the sessions, held by Denise Johnson, which she called 'Focus'. Californian in origin, Denise was brought up a Pentecostal and later travelled to Brazil where she had extensive contact with the Roman Catholic church. She moved to England in 1978, where she found voluntary work at St Michael-le-Belfrey helping students link up with 'parent families' under the oversight of the church. She was later asked by Revd Graham Cray to take up a full time job as Elder for Counselling, a position that she held throughout the 1980s. She positively embraced the spiritual diversity of St Michael's at that time (see chapter three), but left in the early 1990s after a more unilateral, charismatic approach had begun to take root which, in her estimation, stifled this "diversity of gifts". At the time of fieldwork, she was attending St Olaves, a high Anglican church in the centre of York.

A trained and respected counsellor, she was approached by the *Warehouse* group in 1995 to act as an arbiter at a time when several members felt the group was losing its sense of direction. In the wake of the fall of the Nine O' Clock Service (Howard, 1995; Roberts, 1999; see chapter two), *Warehouse* were keen to introduce channels of accountability and were concerned to ensure that members were not feeling oppressed by the power dynamics of the group. Denise was approached as someone who, as a trusted and informed outsider, would be well placed to elicit open discussion and encourage the sharing of problems among members.

Denise Johnson holds one small group session each month and is paid – as a professional counsellor – by the group for her services. She has also supervised further trips away from York, to places of spiritual significance such as Whitby where the

group re-enacted the famous Synod of Whitby, and where each member assumed the perspective of an historical character involved in the event. Practical and interactive exercises were employed as a means of better understanding one another's differences in order to achieve a more nuanced sense of collective identity. *Visions* see Denise as a spiritual guide and mentor and, to some degree, defer to her advice. According to one member, she has helped the group overcome internal conflicts by encouraging them to "listen to one another".

The fact that Denise is counted as a 'spiritual guru' with some authority is not surprising, given her outlook. She embraces a broad and affirmative understanding of Christian spirituality that gels well with the attitudes of the group. But she is also a figure on the fringes of evangelicalism: having once embraced a charismatic evangelical faith, she has since become marginalised from the mainstream, not least *via* her departure from St Michael's. In this, she shares with *Visions* a common "chain of memory" (Hervieu-Leger, in Lyon, 2001: 135) and a sense of having been alienated from an earlier spiritual home. Having steered a more independent path since then, she shares with the group a sense of fracture from traditional allegiances and an empathy with their struggle to find meaning along alternative routes. Moreover, as evidenced in Denise's perspective and professional credentials, it is with the language and relational tone of the counselling movement that the group feel most affinity. Stressing personal affirmation, non-judgement and the need to create 'safe' spaces for the disenfranchised, it suits their self-image and shared ethos perfectly.

During fieldwork, I attended numerous *Visions* small group meetings, including several service planning sessions, a Bible study, two 'Focus' sessions and a series of

social gatherings, including one at which we made candles and another where a local wine merchant gave a talk on port tasting. The variety of small group foci was matched by a curious functional differentiation between sessions. There were no Bibles taken to a service planning meeting, and little talk of service planning at a Bible study. Similarly, while a brief prayer might be offered at a service planning session, this was not the rule and the primary purpose of the meeting was always to plan and prepare for services, in a very practical sense. This is in stark contrast to the small group sessions of St Michael's, which all maintained certain consistencies – conventions of prayer, worship, Bible study and a dialogical style of group learning. These marked each meeting as spiritually significant and conveyed a sense of shared purpose. The *Visions* group are clearly organised along more rationalist principles, and while meetings rarely followed any firm schedule, their sense of thematic focus was consistent and unwavering. Moreover, the infrequency of any conventional rituals such as group prayer did suggest a deliberate distancing from spiritual practices which the group associated with inadequacies of the 'mainstream'.

It will be worth spending some time examining the group's style of interaction in these contexts, drawing from examples observed in the field. *Visions* share with St Michael's an embrace of small groups as useful contexts for the nurturing of relationships, mutual learning and support, and the expression and extension of shared values. But the processes whereby these values are expressed are quite different, and thus foster a very different experience of community.

Sharing the Journey?

The title of Robert Wuthnow's book lends itself well to the *Visions* group. It reflects their conception of the faith life (see chapter six) and the prime function they give to the small group meeting. At one such meeting, convened for reflection on future group projects, the St Michael's vicar, Roger Simpson, was invited to contribute his thoughts on how the group might best develop. He voiced his opinion that *Visions* should include more "teaching" in their services. Daniel Green's response was that they got most of their teaching from small group. Sunday services, according to Daniel, were about the group making a public statement: we are worshipping; this is what we do. "Tearing your soul up", he maintained, "which is what teaching amounts to", is best suited to a different context. And while Roger might favour a more traditional model of teaching, *Visions* make a point of living by the ethic of "mutual discipleship".

By the end of my fieldwork, it was clear to me that this ethic amounted to several different things. Most clearly, members respect one another as individuals and are willing to learn from one another as co-sojourners in the faith. As one member put it, in today's culture, we should not be listening to one person teach the Bible, we should be getting together in groups and working out the truth in mutual dialogue – everyone should have a part to play. Spiritual growth, according to the ethos of the group, depends upon creating spaces for nurturing individual autonomy within a supportive community. An in-house document describing "small group values" defines the desired agenda by listing positive and negative qualities. "Life giving qualities" include "honesty with each other", "acceptance of each other" and "laughter". "Qualities we seek to avoid" include "fear, mistrust, and a lack of forgiveness", "a

rigid code of cultural bondage” and “inappropriate confrontation, and a critical spirit”. Keeping the balance between open, constructive dialogue and a caring, mutual affirmation is at the heart of their purpose.

In principle, this has produced a shared group ethic that seeks to maximise opportunities for genuine and uninhibited self-expression, and minimise the use of structures or resources experienced as oppressive. In practice, any trace of convention that smacks of the evangelical sub-culture has been ostracised, and the group foster a moral style that Penny Becker has called “personalism”. That is, public issues are frequently connected to private needs and experience is invoked as a basis of moral authority (Becker, 1999: 197). Within *Visions*, ‘experience’ is more about sober reflection upon life’s highways and byways, rather than the mapping of religious meaning and the divine ‘numinous’ onto one’s working week. But it does retain the individualism inherent in this subjectivised strand of the evangelical worldview.

The small group meeting is wholly driven by the apparent personal needs of its members and the needs members feel apply to the group. This carries little – if any – significant reference to external authorities, such as those repeatedly invoked in St Michael’s sessions (e.g. scripture, influential writers and preachers). And while I found that prayer and Bible readings did appear, they were not allowed to frame or define meetings, or dictate any kind of agenda. In open discussion, as well as in more structured exercises, it was personal views and impressions which took precedence and which dominated the substance of what was said.

One ‘Focus’ session, taking the topic of death and loss, will provide an instructive example:

Denise reads out a passage from scripture:

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted...a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;”

(Ecclesiastes 3: 1-2, 4)

Given our theme of seasons, Denise says that she thought it might be appropriate for us to jot down a few words and phrases that we associate with Autumn. We are encouraged to write down our thoughts on the small paper handouts distributed at the beginning of the session. Denise checks that everyone is “OK with that” before all those present descend into thought and start scribbling. After about five minutes, we are asked if we’d like to share our feelings. After an initial period of silence, we go around the room and voice our varied impressions. Alison is ambivalent about Autumn, appreciating its beauty and yet sensing something cold and harsh. Daniel echoes his wife’s feelings, but adds that Autumn has a distinct smell, which seems to unite everything in his notes. Adam is positive about the smell of the mould on leaves, the ‘woody’ scent, and smoky smells as people clear out their garden rubbish. Steven talks about the wonderful light and colours of Autumn, adding – with reference to his passion and hobby – that it is great photography weather. Daniel and Alison provide a light interlude in mentioning how much of a mess their garden is. Their “We are not keen gardeners” prompts laughter all round. Denise then asks whether I have anything to offer. Conscious that all contributions so far have been at least partially positive, I tentatively voice my feelings about Autumn being associated with a cold

and chilling loneliness. “Rather negative, I’m afraid”, I add, sheepishly. Denise’s reply is warm and encouraging: “Don’t apologise for your feelings – they’re yours. What is your favourite season...?” (adapted from fieldnotes, 20/10/99)

While this session was occasionally punctuated by Biblical passages, discussion primarily consisted of personal responses to a common experience. The theme of Autumn had a clear symbolic significance given the theme of the session, and yet appeared to prompt a variety of very personal reactions, which participants did not feel obliged to coalesce into a common theological discourse. Individuals stressed sensory experience and personal sentiment, and no single reference was made back to the passage from Ecclesiastes. Moreover, Denise’s response to my own contribution was a classic articulation of the group ethos, emphasising affirmation, non-judgement and a celebration of the diversity of individual experience. This was typical of small group discourse, in so far as individuals were encouraged to express themselves freely and without fear of reprisal, something facilitated by retaining a flexible and minimalist structure. In fact, when discussion became less forthcoming during the same session, Denise said that we need not follow her handout if we did not feel it appropriate; we could just look at some of Steven’s photographs instead. Ever sensitive to the feelings of participants, her aim was to facilitate self-expression, but without any obvious or overwhelming appeal to a defining framework, whether theological or otherwise.

But if *Visions* members are keen to share one another’s spiritual journeys, they are equally passionate about sharing the power base that defines and drives the group itself. As emphasised in chapter six, the group see themselves as an egalitarian and autonomous collective, shaped by the values of each and every one of its members. In

practice, this means that the form and meaning of *Visions* projects, as well as the identity of the group itself, are frequently put under the scrutiny of its members. Such regular reflexive rethinking of identity and shared goals (Giddens, 1991) is facilitated in small group discussion. As another group document states, “ownership for planning is shared by the group, which reflects our understanding of the process.” This understanding allows for the very principles upon which the group was founded to be called into question and debated by its members. And while, in practice, members tend not to undermine established procedures as a matter of course, it is clearly important to them that individuals are made to feel that their input could have a shaping influence over group culture. In so far as *Visions* is openly built on personal relationships, it is accepted that group goals may be revised in line with the changing needs of its membership.

In spite of the spirit of openness and acceptance in which small group sessions were convened, it is worth noting that, often, group discourse was rather restrained and awkward. Denise Johnson confided the difficulty she had getting the group to express themselves openly, and I experienced significant problems in my attempts to talk to them about their faith and values. Part of the problem was a general reticence, exacerbated by introverted personalities. Members simply did not seem to want to talk about their feelings, ideas or values. But there was also an apparent reluctance to articulate belief out of a desire to avoid retaining any outward signs of a conventional evangelicalism. It was part of their response to evangelical culture and tradition that both be questioned, and this spirit extended into styles of discursive exchange. A resistance to convention has evolved into a resistance to formula and to consistency that undermines any impulse to integrate shared beliefs into a single system.

This could be seen in small groups in the laboured discussion, the awkward moments of silence and the tentative responses offered. These are individuals who have known one another for years and who have, in the past, shared moments of crisis and personal trauma, as well as jubilation. And yet any indication of a coherent belief structure remained elusive. Of all the inherited elements of its evangelical heritage, it is perhaps the confessional culture, above all else, that *Visions* have so obviously moved away from. While they insist that they are more unified as a group than their parent church, they do not affirm any sense of ideological unity in internal dialogue. Indeed, perhaps it is because they are united on secure foundations that they do not need to observe the exercises in public affirmation and legitimation so apparent within St Michael's.

Intellectualism

While *Visions* members exhibited some reticence in speaking about their personal beliefs, I did find that group discussion could achieve a somewhat freer, less inhibited level when members attacked subjects in a particular style. Notably, they engaged in the *intellectual* discussion of theological issues with a marked enthusiasm, interest and proficiency. Moreover, while the educational backgrounds of members meant that they held the cultural capital to engage in an academic discussion of, say, the relationship between ritual, liturgy and social action, the unusual passion with which they did this implied that they both valued and thrived on such exchanges.

At one service planning meeting, I was asked by Daniel Green if I would lead a small group session, based on my research. This was only after a month's regular contact with *Visions*, an indication of their openness to outsider contributions and of their confidence in their stability and robustness as a group. They had little idea of my

findings or academic background, and no inkling of my own beliefs and values, or lack of them, at that stage. After a conversation with Steven, who assured me that small group meetings had “no set boundaries”, and who was thoroughly unperturbed by my self-conscious worries about being an sympathetic agnostic, I agreed to lead the session.

I decided to address the relationship between religion and contemporary pop culture, making use of Tom Beaudoin’s innovative volume, *Virtual Faith. The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (1998). Beaudoin examines the theology of ‘Xers’, focussing upon how young people make sense of their lives using pop videos, music and aspects of youth subculture (Lynch, 2002: 54). Through this process, popular culture achieves a spiritual significance. Given the group’s past history and shared goals, I hoped that this topic would be received as both compelling and relevant. I planned to talk for ten or fifteen minutes, before suggesting some questions for group discussion.

On the day, I was very nervous and stumbled through the first ten minutes, hastily summarising my main points and rapidly exhausting my notes. The six *Visions* members present appeared interested but said nothing. My field journal describes the subsequent exchange:

“...after running through the common characteristics of Generation X, Daniel interrupted with a question. The others looked on expectantly. As he slowly and pedantically formulated his point, I began to worry that I was to be faced with an uncomfortable mixture of negative criticism and stony silence. But no, as it happened,

his comments provoked a discussion which lasted, unceasingly, for another hour and which drew in all who were present. This was clearly a topic to which they were all keen to contribute. We covered religion and pop culture, generational differences, and more abstract or complex ideas like transcendence, spirituality and consumerism. Daniel argued that the spiritual requires something outside of the self for its focus, while Adam mused about religious experience requiring some kind of dialogue between subject and object. The discussion was often abstracted onto several different levels and was highly intellectual. I knew it would be, but the subtlety and precision with which some participants expressed their arguments surpassed my expectations. Moreover, participants clearly understood one another and embraced this style of discourse. It became increasingly clear throughout the evening that, although there are many highly intelligent people in St Michael's, they would be unlikely to intellectualise matters so close to their faith in the way that the Visions group did tonight."

(adapted from field journal, 19/1/00)

The group appreciated my session and apparently found it highly stimulating. Rebecca commented that it must have been good because so many members got actively involved. Subsequent observation suggested that it was not merely the topic of discussion that had triggered this enthusiasm, but the style of debate that it had initiated. Members were happier and more comfortable speaking of 'faith' issues in abstract, intellectualised terms, perhaps because of the distance that this affords. The emotive and sentiment-laden discourses of St Michael's were conspicuous for their complete absence.

Within small group discussion, members often drew in knowledge and literary references that firmly located them among the young intellectual classes. They are also familiar with ideas and literature associated with post-modernism, and are adept at using notions such as de-centring, meta-narrative and *bricolage* as intellectual supports for their group projects (Lyon, 2000: 141). Scholarship is appealed to in efforts to challenge Christian tradition and evangelical convention. In one 'Focus' session on the figure of Mary, Denise introduced feminist arguments to undermine patriarchal readings and draw attention to the gender politics bound up in the image of the pure and submissive female. During a Bible study, a verse from Paul's letter to the Ephesians – "And in him you too are being built together to become dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." (2: 22) - was debated extensively. Eventually, a consensus was reached that the verse was essentially about 'community' – "including rather than excluding", naturally. But this was only agreed after two members argued that a use of 'you' was plural in the original Greek. Members were articulating the group's ethos through the text, stressing collective responsibility and mutual care as central to the Christian message. But their authority for this relied upon academic knowledge, rather than simply the text as they found it or, indeed, upon its practical demonstration in their daily lives. While personal experience is important, it is not used as a legitimating resource in the way it is in St Michael's.

Not that discussion secures a resolution of the issues. Indeed, due to the often abstract, intellectualised style of conversation, discussion was not taken as something that must lead to an agreed truth. Members see little problem in disagreeing and holding to a diversity of positions concurrently. And unlike the examples given of St Michael's small groups, internal diversity is not normalised or absorbed into a public discourse,

precisely because, I would argue, it is not considered a threat to group identity. Group identity, as stated earlier, centres on the *affirmation* of internal diversity, and members are comfortable functioning within this environment because this was the route by which they achieved a sense of being affirmed as individuals. The equivalent of astrology here is mainstream charismatic evangelicalism itself, which is seen as a threat to this model of affirming community.

Intellectual discourse facilitates a kind of post-modern reconstruction of tradition, providing the group with tools with which to challenge the evangelical mainstream. The seclusion of small group from central church authorities also allows *Visions* the space to voice their criticisms, as well as their unorthodox ideas, with relative impunity. But intellectualism also initiates a rethinking of shared perceptions of authority. While *Visions* embrace a broad theology, significant for its diversity as well as lack of ordering frameworks (see chapter six), they express a firm faith in certain things. Academic discourse is one. Whether scientific, social scientific or theological, scholarship is embraced as a reliable source of knowledge and a sound set of tools to use on the road to truth. It is judged as more sensible than most preachers and less precarious than charisma. Significantly, academic discourse also represents a form of cultural capital that most of the group possess and which they can comfortably deploy. In other words, it readily confirms their own sense of autonomy and control in the negotiation of religious legitimacy.

Donald Miller (1997) argues that, among 'new paradigm' churches, a stress on individual experience has 'democratised' access to the sacred. While *Visions* would adopt a cynical perspective on this, they embrace a similar idea, but place independent

(though interactive) thought at the centre of their version of Protestant egalitarianism. Individuals have equal access to God, but not merely because of His ready accessibility. Rather, they have equal access by virtue of their reflective capacity to search and apprehend the complexities of the divine as they follow their own journey through life. This is a cerebral vision, grounded in the vulnerability of humanity and the determination of the post-modern pilgrim. Drawing from intellectualism and scholarship, it favours the abstract over the relational, experiment and innovation over stasis. In so doing it fosters an individualistic kind of faith, but this is a faith that paradoxically depends upon community for its affirmation. Small group holds the freedoms together, and is instrumental in sustaining a balance of diversity and unity.

Mutual Support

As implied earlier, the interaction at *Visions* small group meetings is less emotionally charged than exchanges within St Michael's. Personal feelings are only voiced tentatively, personal problems faced with difficulty and prayer, if practised at all, is rarely by laying on of hands. And yet small groups still serve as the focus for a strong mutual support extended between members, who rely upon group meetings as the basis of their Christian identities. On one level, small groups have become a haven for "homeless minds" (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974). Marginalised from the mainstream, yet feeling a yearning for Christian community, members have come to value *Visions* – especially the intimacy offered by small group – as a place of nurture in which their identities are fostered. One core member told me that the best thing about being part of *Visions* was that "It's OK to be me."

But while heterodoxy is tolerated and room created for spiritual exploration, the ‘community’ offered by *Visions* extends beyond the benefits of an encounter group. Mutual support between members adopts a decidedly practical form. Members loan their cars to one another, fetch shopping for each other and agree to dip into the common purse on occasions when individuals are in need. One core member contrasted this with her experiences of mainstream church life: “...they say they’re there for you but you’re not quite sure if they are, whereas in *Visions* you can rely on people to be there for you.” There is a perception of genuine personal concern for one another as individuals, which is not dependent upon confessions of faith or doctrinal conformity. And though a similar magnanimity is evident among the St Michael’s congregation, it is not extended along such obviously practical lines. *Visions* are a close-knit group, having forged common bonds over a number of years, and their understanding of belonging to the group includes this sense of practical commitment, not just to shared goals, but to one another as individuals. Moreover, this very practical kind of assistance was rarely made sense of openly in Christian terms.

Language

The small group also consolidates the collective identity of the group by offering the means by which to sustain and refine a relatively closed system of communication. Wuthnow’s (1996) concern, that small groups become entrenched in their own heterodoxy, may be extended to include the very language members use in engaging in dialogue with one another. The isolation of *Visions* has apparently generated a shared argot, a style of spoken discourse which members have developed over time and which they understand. They practice what Douglas Coupland has dubbed “obscurism”, “the practice of peppering daily life with obscure references” as a means

of “showcasing both one’s education and one’s wish to dissociate from the world of mass culture.” (Coupland, 1991: 192) As always, however, their object of dissociation is a little closer to home.

While parallel media in St Michael’s centre around theological short-hand (“fellowship”; “coming to know the Lord”) or relational sentiment (“my brother in the Lord”; God as “Dad”), *Visions* distance themselves from such charismatic *lingua franca*. Instead, technical and academic language has filled the vacuum left by its exclusion. And flows of conversation, dotted as they are with esoteric references, allusions to shared experiences and the technical jargon of audio-visual technology, have come to deploy these discourses as a powerful excluding mechanism. Outsiders are kept at a distance by the boundaries of the group’s communicative discourse.

I experienced this personally *via* my attempts to engage in group culture, but soon found that other peripheral members also felt distanced for the same reasons. I spoke with one peripheral member who, in spite of her attending *Visions* events regularly for eighteen months, had little idea about what the group actually believed or stood for. Her values very much reflected those of other members, embracing spiritual diversity, a yearning for community and an exploratory approach to religion. But she felt unable to properly explore these issues because she felt excluded from the core group, and from its conversational discourse in particular. *Visions* have developed a shared language, and while services suggest a radical engagement with the globalised world, on a face-to-face level the group is relatively closed to outsiders and resists the adjustments to informal communication which external engagement demands. As charted in the previous chapter, they have come to a point where their projects are

shaped by a desire to service their own needs rather than those of a potential outside audience.

Comparisons

In many ways small groups serve as sites for the expression and negotiation of the subcultural patterns hinted at earlier. For St Michael's, these are an internal tolerance of diversity alongside an affirmation of theological boundaries; the 'ritualisation of life' (Csordas, 1997) and infusion of subjective experience with divinely ordained meaning; and a general expression of the importance of community, worked out as regular meetings, personal interaction and problem sharing. For *Visions*, these are a de-centring of religious knowledge by way of endorsing a model of learning and power that stresses mutuality – rather than hierarchy - as its centre; a critique of mainstream evangelicalism using the tools of intellectual discourse; and an affirmation of Christian community embodied in practical mutual support. In this sense, the small group is a microcosm of shared values that extend into a much wider remit.

An analysis of small groups also highlights the degree to which shared social values are legitimated and embedded in a Christian framework, a process made possible by the intimacy and autonomy afforded by small group meetings. Individuals have a platform from which to voice their convictions, without being subject to the same restraints found in church. In the *Alpha* group, I found that this generated a certain endorsement of commonly held middle class lifestyles, an extension, no doubt, of bias in the course materials as well as of an impulse of reflexive self-legitimation. This act depends upon a rather malleable spiritual resource, nurtured in part by the subjectivisation discussed in chapter five. Given the tools with which to search for,

discern, name and claim the divine and spiritual in one's own life experience, individuals may then draw connections which only demand the stamp of inner conviction. Peers then form an assembly which may affirm or contest one's claims, and small groups provide both stage and audience for the performance. Given the importance of evading conflict, charted in chapter four, it is unsurprising that affirmation is the norm. Moreover, as most congregants share a similar combination of social experiences and cultural capital, they are unlikely to contest claims which amount to a religious celebration of their social identity. The 'turn to life' (Simmel, 1997) is extended into social convention in addition to inter-personal problem solving (see chapter five on 'words of knowledge').

In this sense, order and meaning receive their impetus from concerns forged outside of church life, relating to families, jobs, money and economic stability. Careers become divinely guided while nuclear families become centres of moral order. In one sense, as far as middle class lifestyles achieve legitimation, they become a dominant authority and shaping influence over shared Christian teaching. While I would not suggest an uncritical parallel with New Age 'self-spirituality' (Heelas, 1996b: 36), there is a discernible turn away from the purely external, prescriptive authorities traditional to evangelicalism, and a greater reliance upon channels of significance defined by individuals. Values are still constructed and negotiated with reference to external sources, not least church leaders, devotional literature, and a set of shared preconceptions about moral order. But there is also a clear loosening of these external sources, whereby they cease to demand unwavering assent and become resources appropriated according to the subjective needs of individuals.

This may be phrased as a *parochialisation* of evangelical identity, as Christian tradition is conflated with the norms of middle class subculture brought to church life by St Michael's members. As noted above, this has helped engender a stress upon non-judgement, affirmation, expressivism and individual autonomy. Given the extent to which *Visions* carry these classically modern themes further (see chapter six), it is perhaps ironic that their small group sessions only partially capitalise on them. Indeed, while expressivist in the sense of remaining open to individual contributions, in practice, *Visions* small groups do not appear to foster an open, person-centred expressivism in the style that comes so naturally to St Michael's members. Group interaction is, instead, rather awkward, hesitant and remains relatively inaccessible to outsiders. There is less sharing of personal problems and mutual support is practical rather than tactile and demonstrative. The reasons for this are complex, but can be connected to the debate outlined in chapter one, about the tension between modernisation and community.

Small Groups, Modernisation and Meaning

According to Peter Berger, modernity generates serious uncertainties for the individual, who faces alienation and "homelessness" as a result of the dominance of technology, bureaucracy and pluralism throughout primary social institutions (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974). Individuals are forced to rely, in their search for meaning, on the subjective resources of the self, an authority which is precarious as it lacks significant social support. In suggesting social resources which may be mobilised against this trend, Berger draws from Gehlen, proposing 'secondary institutions'. Heelas and Woodhead take up the issue:

"These are less strongly institutionalised than the primary institutions which are experienced as iron cage meaningfulness and rigidity. At the same time, they are

sufficiently institutionalized to provide some guidance, and thus to serve as a refuge and support for homeless minds. Secondary institutions may cater for those who seek liberation from the iron cage, who want to find identity and growth by way of what lies within, but who feel the need for guidance with regard to what their 'subjective reality' has to offer." (Heelas and Woodhead, 2000: 46)

According to Heelas and Woodhead, secondary institutions tend to be less regulative and less authoritative than primary institutions. Rather than demanding a strict conformity and deferral to hierarchy, they offer experiences which are life-affirming and life-expanding, are 'soft' rather than 'hard', and emphasise autonomy, democracy and intra-personal exchange (Heelas and Woodhead, 2000: 53). A good empirical example would be small groups, and recent studies by Miller (1997) and Wuthnow (1996) have revealed how small groups can be harnessed as enclaves of community and providers of meaning in a world characterised by moral chaos and perpetual uncertainty (Wuthnow, 1996: 79). Arguing along similar lines, Tony Walter suggests that small groups provide places where individuals can be 'known', i.e. recognised and affirmed as people with distinct needs and qualities, in a culture typified by privatisation and a sense of isolation (Walter, 1995).

But, to return to a question raised in chapter one, we must ask whether small groups serve as an *effective* bulwark against modernisation? And to what extent does *Visions* provide an example of how small groups can foster entrenched heterodoxies (Wuthnow, 1994) to the point of securing a 'safe' liberalisation alongside relatively strong shared bonds?

The first point to make is that, drawing from the above analysis, small groups in both St Michael's and *Visions* do not simply serve as hedges against 'modern anomie' (B. Martin, 1998). It would be more accurate to suggest that small groups provide a set of filters for the mediation of dominant processes of value change: liberalisation and

subjectivisation. In particular, they offer contexts for the empowerment and expression of subjectivised authorities, and for the socialisation of new members into the 'dominant discourse' of the group (Baumann, 1996).

The St Michael's sessions revolve around what might be called a *structured expressivism*. Meaning is constructed and conveyed using media familiar within the broader evangelical subculture: ritualised methods of group prayer, sentimental styles of worship, non-confrontational discussion and familiar language. These are deployed consistently, so that new participants quickly learn the rules of engagement. Moreover, the stylistic overlap with behavioural norms conventional to middle class culture is sufficiently obvious to allay any perception of unfamiliarity or strangeness on the part of peripheral participants. (We note that those who dropped out of *Alpha* first were those individuals least likely to fall into this middle class, professional category). In this sense, small group provides a context for the gentle socialisation of newcomers into the shared culture of St Michael's. This would be a banal point if not for its striking success. St Michael's appears attuned to outsiders – at least to its target audience – and deploys mechanisms to include them within a common discourse, while nurturing them into their own worldview. As with the patterns in public discourse discussed in chapter four, St Michael's appears to maintain a shared culture *via* subtle processes of control and repeated patterns of conduct. And while it is through conforming to these processes that one is taken as an authentic member of the fellowship, undecided sojourners (including myself) are given ample space to be absorbed gradually, with minimal coercion.

That said, within St Michael's, if one does not agree with the dominant discourse, there is little room for saying so. Within a given remit, boundaries are noticeably policed. The woman keen on astrology was subject to this process of control, and her sense of exclusion was evident when she dropped out of the course, soon afterwards. Members remained within the group by toeing the line or keeping quiet; those that could not left.

Daniel Green noted this feature as an aspect of St Michael's church life as a whole. To him, it contrasted negatively with the way things are done in *Visions*.

“If *Visions* didn't exist I'd have to invent it! ...the thing is that here is an expression of us to God. That is an underlying facet. I think that's possibly one of ways in which *Visions* differs from the rest of St Mike's. The rest of St Mike's exists, and gets twisted to being an expression of God but people have to flex themselves to be part of it. We have the privilege of flexing *Visions*, of flexing what *we* do, to be *our* expression...”

Daniel is speaking of general tensions, between conformity and innovation, legitimacy versus authenticity, which characterise the main differences between the two groups. But his comments carry particular weight if applied to the norms of conduct in small groups. I noted in chapter six how *Visions* have come to focus upon the needs of members, rather than the needs of potential recruits, and discussed earlier in this chapter how this has played a part in the generation of a shared argot, meaningful to insiders but often relatively closed to outsiders and peripheral participants. In addition to this, *Visions* have developed a set of practical norms which shape group conduct in small groups and other contexts. They also reflect, as Daniel observes, the values and priorities of the group. But unlike small groups in St Michael's, these practices assume a relatively esoteric form. Members evade conventional rituals associated with prayer or Bible study, and speak about their faith often using inaccessible language. Taking these alongside the strained, often awkward dialogue and the group's

reluctance to conform to a charismatic *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) of sentiment, emotion and expressive performance, a picture emerges of a community that refuses to offer the behavioural norms that facilitate the expressivism typical in St Michael's.

This poses problems for outsiders, as well as for peripheral or occasional participants, many of whom are evangelicals who are confounded by the lack of familiar behavioural landmarks that, for them, would secure a degree of meaning and sense of significance. I spoke to numerous individuals who, having attended *Visions*, found the experience rather alienating, for reasons relating to the very elements that the core group maintain in order to offer an accepting environment. While relative quietude and non-contact is refreshingly liberating and respectful for some, it leaves a lacuna that is suggestive of abstraction, loneliness and disorder for others. In short, the lack of conventional structure in *Visions* events could foster a kind of anomie, a lack of order and absence of meaningfulness. Core members see no problem, as they have come to find their own meanings over time, and have the added benefit of having been empowered by the planning process. So, while the group have indeed 'flexed' what they do into an expression of Christian commitment, this is a model of commitment and practice that struggles to achieve meaning outside of a specific subcultural remit. In this sense it assumes a closed, almost sectarian form, in spite of the group's rather liberal beliefs, and small groups have helped to generate and sustain this pattern. In short, the 'community congregation' model (Becker, 1999), it seems, can be self-defeating, as it promotes a turn inward, to member needs, and a consequent failure to cater to the needs of potential new recruits.

SUMMARY

Both St Michael's and *Visions* are characterised by a relatively high level of member commitment to group projects. Individuals invest time, effort and money in the church, which to some degree is allowed to shape their social routine. Most clearly, members of both associate membership with a strong sense of belonging and being nurtured in a supportive community.

Analysing the two factions of the church in terms of small group activity reveals a strange arrangement, which stands in a paradoxical relationship to their respective belief systems. St Michael's fosters a 'soft', non-judgemental, affirming environment which attracts and retains members at least in part because mechanisms of inclusion allow like-minded individuals to find common ground. *Visions* embraces the values of affirmation and non-judgement, but, because of its isolated and reactionary status, has developed a closed structure, which confounds outsiders while sustaining strong bonds among the core group. For them, liberalisation has come with a certain isolationism, and this has no doubt intensified the need for strong community boundaries.

CHAPTER EIGHT CONCLUSION: COMMUNITY AND COMMITMENT

To conclude, I will offer a summary of the foregoing argument, followed by a brief discussion of some of the theoretical issues raised in the opening chapter. The question of community will be re-addressed, specifically in relation to issues of growth and commitment within both St Michael's and in the *Visions* group.

Summary of the Argument

In chapter one, in light of my experiences in the field, I suggested an initial comparison of the two groups, in terms of the negotiation of community. St Michael's emphasises its boundaries with the world while *Visions* consciously attempts to challenge, problematise, undermine and reconfigure these boundaries, both on an aesthetic and discursive level. But rather than conceive of the two groups as strictly opposed, I suggested that they are both embroiled in wider processes of accommodation, whereby evangelicalism is adapting to the norms of modern culture.

These wider shifts were addressed in chapter two, which argued that as evangelicalism in England has expanded, it has increasingly engaged with forces outside of its traditional remit. The consequent processes of liberalisation and subjectivisation were explored in more detail in chapters four, five and six. These detailed, from various angles, the accommodation of the evangelical worldview to forces of modern change within the two case study groups. The beliefs of the St Michael's congregation betray a considerable accommodation to modern ideas, notably tolerance, flexibility and a respect for individual difference. However, there are also significant residues of traditionalist belief, focussed in soteriology and Biblicism. The congregation also affirm a supernaturalist ontology bequeathed by the charismatic movement. Chapter

four demonstrated how public discourse – most notably in sermons – has accommodated to the diversity of attitudes within the church by avoiding issues likely to cause fracture and ‘papering over’ issues which may cause conflict. In this way, the congregation as a whole are able to affirm conservative and more liberal positions concurrently by emphasising different ideas in private and public discourse, and thereby achieve a sense of unity in spite of diversity.

Chapter five charted the influence of subjectivism upon congregational culture. Contrary to the dominant understanding, while fostering a degree of individualisation, I argued that subjectivisation in St Michael’s does not always or necessarily generate atomisation. Rather, a focus upon experience and the self helps to forge common bases of identity, fostered through personal narratives which are forged and shared by congregants in dialogue with one another. Subjectivity generates channels of commonality. Ritualised episodes of subjective experience tend to be either privatised (prayer, glossolalia) or convey a focus on issues of an intra-personal significance (words of knowledge). In this way they reflect modern moves towards individualisation alongside a ‘turn to life’ (Simmel, 1997). In sum, a shift towards the privatisation of religious concerns is tempered by a parallel focus upon relationships within the congregation. Subjectivity is social as well as self-focussed.

In chapter six, I described how the *Visions* group emphasises the importance of offering a welcome environment for those who feel excluded from mainstream churches. They share with their parent church a stress upon tolerance and a respect of diversity, but embrace a more radical liberalisation. First, an ‘ethic of civility’ (Hunter, 1987) has become an almost universalist respect for spiritual diversity. This

is expressed in (a) experimentalism in worship, including the use of divergent resources of a Christian, non-religious and 'alternative religious' kind, and (b) the policy of accepting newcomers without the expectation that they change in any way. This may be expressed as a kind of *humanisation*: the relaxation of symbolic boundaries has led to a tendency to de-emphasise religious differences and instead stress unity based on a common humanity (Wallis, 1984). Second, an ongoing effort to distance itself from the evangelical mainstream has led to the adoption of classically 'liberal' priorities. Most clearly, they follow Jim Wallis and the 'evangelical left' in foregrounding issues of social justice, community responsibility and a respect for the environment.

In terms of subjectivism, *Visions* members affirm a faith in the importance of personal experience as a locus of divine activity and in this they do not differ from their parent church. But they are far less demonstrative about this in public and have relegated ministry prayer, at best, to the margins of their services. The invocation of charismatic gifts is no longer a feature of group culture. In this sense, *Visions* have responded with suspicion to the hyper-emotional use of charismata in the 1990s and, while St Michael's has subsequently tempered and toned down their use, *Visions* appears to have ceased their practice altogether. However, *Visions* attach great importance to subjectivity in so far as they embrace what Penny Becker has called "personalism", i.e. the linking of public issues to private needs and the use of experience as a powerful basis of moral authority (Becker, 1999: 197). More specifically, services and group projects are designed so as to be personally authentic to *Visions* members. Their small size, isolation as a group and post-evangelical ethos have allowed them to place subjective needs at the centre of group life.

Chapter seven explored the ways in which community is maintained. Both groups elicit high levels of practical commitment from members. But this is expressed in different contexts. St Michael's offers a series of formal, organised meetings such as home groups and prayer meetings. *Visions* fosters more of a 'lifestyle', a holistic commitment to group goals through an interweaving of sacred and secular experience. Offering networks of support and contexts of intimacy, small groups foster community within both factions. They also allow for the development of divergent discourses, which serve as the vehicle for the legitimation of shared values, and as a significant mechanism for the construction of community boundaries. The chapter closed with the paradox that, while the more conservative by belief, St Michael's sustains a relatively open system of communication, particularly suited to the middle class elective parochials that are its chief source of recruitment. By contrast, the isolation and marginalised status of the *Visions* group has generated a comparatively closed discourse, which keeps outsiders at a distance rather than embrace them, in accordance with the group's ethos.

Broader Implications

The analysis raises a number of important issues which are pertinent to an understanding of the ongoing accommodation of evangelicalism to modern culture. Most clearly, a consideration of the two case studies suggests that liberalisation and subjectivisation do not *necessarily* erode or fragment communities. Rather, these processes are filtered by mediating structures, linked with demography, locality and the history of individual groups (Martin, 2002: 52). They are also subject to processes of negotiation within the confines of local cultures, and thus to processes of social interaction (Fine, 1979). The omission of these factors is raised as a problem with

Peter Berger's work, in an essay by James Davison Hunter. Hunter (in Wuthnow *et al*, 1984) highlights the way in which Berger assumes a relatively straightforward relationship between identity and social structure. Changes in primary institutions, such as education or the workplace, are assumed to affect changes in the consciousness of individuals. This is no doubt the case, but Berger implies that these changes amount to a direct, almost logical response to the nature of structural conditions. Technology induces a worldview that stresses the componentiality of reality, bureaucracy the sequential, predictability of life (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974: 29-61). What Berger does not do is explore the mediating structures which channel these relationships and shape the effect of one factor upon the other. As Hunter comments,

"Berger's theory, it would seem, could profit greatly from a more systematic discussion of the different empirical relationships between the contents of socialization and different social structural configurations - the structural bases of personality."
(Wuthnow *et al*, 1984: 71)

Though a systematic discussion is impossible here, chapters four and five do offer a clear vindication of Hunter's point. Why does liberalisation fail to significantly fragment the St Michael's congregation? Because diversity is celebrated and differences likely to cause fracture are papered over in *public* discourse. Why does subjectivisation within St Michael's not lead to atomisation and the fragmentation of community? Because subjectivity generates narratives which require *communal* channels of expression in order to secure meaning. In other words, the effects of these two processes upon the convictions of members are shaped by the communicative culture of the congregation. Chapter seven took this argument a step further. Small groups not only serve as contexts for the legitimation of shared beliefs, but occupy a key role in the socialisation of new members into the 'dominant discourse' of the church. In performing this role, they largely re-affirm the patterns of liberalisation and

subjectivisation expressed elsewhere, while also fostering intimacy and mutual support among members. In other words, community is fostered *via* an interactive medium which also serves as a channel for a liberalised kind of evangelicalism. *Visions* stands as a decidedly different case, its reliance upon subcultural markers and its reactionary stance against its parent tradition call attention to the way in which mid-level factors shape movements of change. Its use of technology, for example, cannot be understood without reference to the artistic heritage of the charismatic tradition and the group's post-evangelical perspective on person-based authority.

But if community is sustained within both groups, what kind of community is this? While it is widely argued that the fragmentation of the modern condition generates longings for community (Lyon, 2000: 31), it is also often argued that efforts to forge communities are doomed to failure because of the fragmentation of social life (Bauman, 2001; Bruce, 2002: 14). This is an extreme position, based on Tonnies (1955) notion of the *Gemeinschaft* as inversely related to the progression of modernisation. However, it would be more consistent with the evidence to suggest a transformation and reinvention of community in the light of changing conditions. Maffesoli (1988) has spoken of 'neo-tribes', interest and lifestyle-based groups which emerge as a response to the heightened individualism of late modernity. They are unstable, maintained through shared beliefs and consumption practices rather than by conventional ascriptive affinities such as class or regional identities. His description suggests some affinity with the fledgling alternative worship network, were it not for its local links with churches and the undeniably middle class background of its constituency. Moreover, as the example of *Visions* demonstrates, the relative isolation of groups can generate an almost sectarian structure, characterised by tight boundaries

and a close-knit membership. They have forged a community for themselves and thus escaped post-modern fragmentation, but their esoteric and elusive project has demanded its own logic and language, and both have emerged and been sustained among a relatively consistent core group. The result is sectarian in so far as it is closed, albeit around an increasingly liberal enclave.

The St Michael's home groups show less inwardness due to their being embedded in a larger structure, which assists in the provision of leadership, organisation and materials. Members participate in a larger, but proximate, culture while resolving questions and problems through face-to-face dialogue. In offering places in which the individual can be felt to 'be known' (Walter, 1995), they do make up for what Berger saw as the 'underinstitutionalised' state of the private sphere (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974: 167). But home groups function in the middle ground, as 'secondary institutions' (Heelas and Woodhead, 2000), and it is this which grants their distinctiveness. While sufficiently private to foster intimacy and familiarity, they are sufficiently public to allow communality and a *sharing of subjectivities*. Examples from the *Alphalink* course in chapter seven demonstrate how references to external links in this sharing process enhance a sense of legitimacy and belonging among members. They are not merely members of a home group, but participants in a home group network, co-searchers on the *Alpha* journey and channels for the wisdom and knowledge generated from past experience and encounters with the spiritual.

Indeed, it is such a network of interactive contexts which may best characterise the community offered within St Michael's. While the *experience* of being fostered is seen in terms of a meeting of subjective needs, the medium through which this occurs

is an overlapping network of meetings, interest groups, services and friendship circles. As with the *Visions* group, these demonstrate an affinity with a particular set of social interests, catering to the middle class socialities of its membership. But the huge scale of St Michael's means that 'community' is inevitably mediated by diffuse networks and the choices individuals make about which church meetings best suit their needs. Such an arrangement is arguably inevitable in large, middle class evangelical churches, in which there is a high turnover of members. The question then remains as to whether this arrangement leads to an inevitable weakening of commitment, as argued by Becker (1999).

Sustaining Community and Commitment

In addressing this issue, it will be instructive to revisit a question raised in the opening chapter: how is community sustained within St Michael's and in *Visions*? One clear factor relates to boundaries. Both communities mark their borders in terms of the various phenomena from which they would like to be distinguished (Cohen, 1985: 12). But these boundaries do not simply equate to the oppositional enemies which Simmel argued are essential to Protestantism, the latter remaining essentially a movement of protest (Simmel, 1955). To be fair, both groups retain for their nemesis 'the world', though they interpret this differently, and for *Visions*, a symbolic opposition to mainstream charismatic evangelicalism is just as important. But what is clear from the foregoing analysis is that boundaries are continually negotiated in accordance with the needs of members. Religion has become that which affirms the social order of the groups' membership, or minimally that which allows members to affirm their social identity using religious means. Within St Michael's, this is clear from the control of public discourse in sermons and in words of knowledge. Issues

likely to cause conflict are evaded while members are given the means with which to affirm their existing values and conventions, and work through their worries. The value system of the church becomes fused with the social constituency of its congregation, so that career advancement, education, the nuclear family and issues of personal emotional struggle are absorbed into the divine plan and then projected as ordained priorities into the faith lives of individual members. Indeed, one hypothesis as to why this occurs may refer to the diffuseness of middle class values throughout British culture, and their lack of an ordering framework. Within an increasingly amoral, media-driven, fast-paced western society, moral order is elusive, a special concern among uprooted middle class families with young children. St Michael's appears to skate that fine line between accommodating to a theologically diverse congregation, while providing ample space for the expression and exploration of 'traditional' understandings of moral order. The peculiar way in which moral teaching is dealt with, discussed in chapter four, brings this out most clearly. To refer back to Berger, "homeless minds" are provided with solace and a place in which to share their homelessness, but the spiritual homes provided are flexible enough to be able to adapt to individual needs and theological diversity (Berger, Berger and Kellner, 1974).

But this model has limitations, and excludes those who fail to find meaning within a particular set of cultural affinities. It was the recognition of this which triggered the emergence of what became the *Visions* group. Reaching out to those for whom conventional church was anathema, they broke out of the bonds of the evangelical subculture from whence they came. They embodied the dance culture in an attempt to 'preach' the Gospel in a way which was culturally authentic to the 'clubbers'. In effect, they established their own subculture with its own set of boundaries. *Visions*

found itself on the margins, stuck between evangelicalism and secular culture. But rather than facilitate a channel between the two, the group became isolated, leading to a turn inward, to the group's own needs rather than those of its target audience. The markers of the dance culture have become the *Visions* culture, absorbing group interests, artistic preferences and shared grievances along the way. In this respect members also affirm their own social identities through their religious practice.

But because of its small scale and marginalised status in relation to St Michael's and the rest of the church, *Visions* has developed a quasi-sectarian structure. The group are not closed or exclusivist in their theology – quite the opposite – but they do exist in “some measure of protest against the dominant religious system and against at least some aspects of contemporary culture.” (Wilson, 1996: 743) More strikingly, they are social separatists by inclination, preferring to mix with others of a like-mind and often feeling alienated from mainstream evangelicalism and those affiliated to it. Thus, while St Michael's has arguably extended its affinities with contemporary middle class culture, *Visions* have adopted a hard set of social boundaries against it. Indeed, this often finds open expression in services. During a service run by *Visions* but in the St Michael-le-Belfrey church, Rebecca performed a ‘rant’, a diatribe against the superficiality of consumerism, and the evils of the branding and designer-label culture. Tellingly, one St Michael's member took exception to this, claiming that he had friends who had to buy designer clothes because of their job. For him, *Visions* is quite excluding, especially for people made to feel a bit too ‘straight’.

This is one of the main reasons why an appeal to ‘postmodernity’ alone – with the associations of deregulation which it implies (Lyon, 2000)- is insufficient for an

understanding of alternative worship groups such as *Visions*. While embracing a multi-media technology which appears to undermine traditional parameters of meaning, these groups largely exist as *marginalised enclaves*. As such, they rely on oppositional relationships for a sense of identity, whether their nemesis be consumer culture, free market capitalism or the established church. Moreover, the cultural resources upon which they draw in defining their identities are inevitably shaped by traditional social factors, particularly gender, class, generation and ecclesiastical background. The innovations of postmodernity take place within the confines of localised conditions.

While the two groups have adopted soft and hard social boundaries respectively, they still embrace fairly liberal sets of values by evangelical standards. As such they have developed plausibility structures which do not require hard *ideological boundaries*. As argued in chapters four and five, within St Michael's, public discourse is organised in a way which avoids calling attention to private differences, so that a sense of belonging within a common project is conveyed without recourse to 'clear, exacting demands' (Kelley, 1972). What appears to be more important, at least in terms of what members value about being a part of the church, is the provision of an effective support network. The class status of the church means that this is not focussed into projects of social or economic advancement, but is rather centred on the forging of affective relationships. Members rely on one another for mutual support, moral guidance and emotional nurture. According to the 'welcome cards' distributed to newcomers, St Michael's is

“...a fellowship of Christian believers who believe seriously in the life-changing power of God's mercy and truth. We are a church where you can experience friendship, fellowship and acceptance as we grow together in our love and commitment to Jesus Christ.”

The emphases here are telling: no reference to scripture, no use of ‘evangelical’, no mention of “authority”, “sound teaching”, “Bible believing”, “judgement” or even “salvation”. Instead, the description emphasises this-worldly experience of God, alongside affirming qualities of “friendship” and “acceptance”. This is indicative of two things: the ubiquitous diplomacy of public discourse and the prioritisation of inter-personal support and intimacy. But what is important here is not just the availability of support, but the availability of opportunities to adopt supportive roles. St Michael’s offers a supportive and extensive community of like-minded friends, a context for the transmission of ‘sound family values’ of love and responsibility (especially appealing to those with small children), and opportunities for authority and empowerment consonant with one’s own organisational, pastoral or pedagogical skills. It is these factors which appear to elicit continued commitment and enthusiastic involvement from parishioners. Of course, in addition to this is the reputation and spiritual pedigree of the church, which enhances feelings of status and of participating in an *effective* evangelical fellowship. If anything, St Michael’s is ridden with the impression that this is a church which *actually works* – it lives out the Gospel in ways which are socially visible, and members cling onto this with pride and an almost tangible enthusiasm.

However, while maintaining high levels of commitment, St Michael’s is not managing to retain as many committed members as it used to. As charted in chapters two and seven, attendance levels have experienced a steady decline since 1993, fewer people are involved in home groups than before and financial giving has declined in real terms. St Michael’s is not enjoying the same levels of success which it intermittently

sustained during the 1970s and 80s. Why might this be so? Several possibilities can be suggested.

First, the generation which committed to David Watson's ministry in the 1960s are growing older and the older ones are dying. It is possible that subsequent generations, following Niebuhr's (1962) argument, are less committed, and some are not remaining within the church. In so far as the number of those leaving exceeds the number of those who die or cease to attend because of old age, then decline is almost inevitable. However, death alone cannot account for the numbers at issue: in 1995, for example, 33 people were taken off the electoral roll.

A more plausible explanation would refer to the narrowing of spirituality in the early 1990s. The introduction of the Toronto Blessing, and of the conservative teaching of the new vicar coincide with the beginning of what became an unrelenting decline in both members and levels of attendance. The heightened and dramatised use of charismatic gifts was foregrounded in church life, to the exclusion of other, less expressivist, forms of spirituality, and this caused feelings of alienation and some disinvolvement. Other parishioners were offended by the vicar's conservative views on authority, women and Biblical moral teaching. While attendance statistics do not suggest a mass exodus, they do support the possibility that fewer new members stayed within the church than they used to, or perhaps long-term members continued to leave in small clusters throughout the nineties. As several of the long-term members who left were involved in church leadership, it is also possible that they prompted others to act similarly. If this argument holds, then it counts firmly against Berger's argument that the most thriving religious groups are those which erect successful boundaries

against modern influence (Berger, 1969; 1999), as an attempt to introduce “values of protest” (Wilson, 1967) against modern culture has clearly provoked disinvolvement. Additionally, it would stand against Kelley’s (1972) claim about conservative churches growing, as it was a switch from a more liberal to a more conservative position that set St Michael’s on a trend of unrelenting decline.

Third, an external factor may relate to the recent growth among independent evangelical churches in the immediate locality. Robin Gill (1993) does not have figures for these, so it is impossible to make comparisons, though insider estimates provided in 2002 do suggest significant pockets of growth. To take but one example, ‘The Rock Church’ consistently has an attendance of over three hundred with mid week small groups of up to 60. According to church leaders, these levels have been as high as this for 2-3 years, so it possible that decline in St Michael’s is at least in part due to potential new members – many of them students – worshipping elsewhere. Also significant in the early 1990s was the North Yorkshire Vineyard church, planted by David Watson’s widow, Anne and initially stocked with former St Michael’s members. At its peak, it was attracting around 120 individuals. After Watson left, it quickly fell into decline and eventually shut down after the congregation shrank down to about twenty and could no longer support its pastor. While this church is no longer competing with St Michael’s for members, it is possible that those who joined but then left have not returned to St Michael-le-Belfrey, perhaps going elsewhere.

Finally, and this returns to the point about community raised earlier, it could be the case that St Michael’s caters to its target audience a little too well. To expand, the leadership recognises that much of its congregational body is made up of students and

elective parochials, who will probably move on within the space of a few years. While some are aware of the limitations which this brings (see the quotation from the associate minister in chapter three), the church has very much adapted its outlook so as to cater to these people. This was made clear during small group sessions, where former members were remembered and prayed for without any degree of regret or disappointment. That many would move into and among the church's structures for a temporary period before moving on was accepted as inevitable. But as Wuthnow has argued with respect to small groups, this outlook allows bonding to remain temporary and commitment becomes attenuated (Wuthnow, 1996: 25). There is a sense in which expectations of commitment have acclimatised to the mobile predicament of elective parochials, so that the authentic member is no longer one who commits to a home group, attends services every Sunday and comes to the monthly prayer meeting. Rather, the authentic member is one who attends, maybe sporadically, occasionally, focussing their commitment into special occasions. Such a trend is actually borne out by the available attendance figures. While evening service attendance has fallen by 38% during the 1990s, attendance at Easter has increased by 40%. Such participants may be characterised as "conference people" (Coleman, 2000: 108-9), who seek occasions of heightened experience, rather than a long-term commitment to a single church. The segmentation of church life into a series of available meetings and services may also, paradoxically, contribute to a weakening of commitment. Individuals simply associate 'membership' with participation (i.e. at whichever service or meeting is convenient), rather than with attendance at a prescribed series of meetings. Therefore, there is a possibility that as expectations of long-term commitment have lowered, or at least a more attenuated commitment has become more acceptable, fewer occasional participants have made the transition to being a

‘full’ member by becoming involved in an extended series of regular church activities.

If valid, this would endorse Steve Bruce’s claim that liberalised religious groups have less chance of growing, but a qualification needs to be made. Bruce, it would seem, is right to highlight the consequences of insufficiently emphasising the difference between membership and non-membership (Bruce, 1989). But I would argue against the simple correlation between a ‘liberal’ outlook and a propensity to decline. According to Bruce, liberal churches are more likely to decline than conservative ones because the diffuseness of their beliefs makes them unstable as social institutions (Bruce, 2002: 239). According to my analysis, the beliefs of the evangelicals in St Michael’s are significantly liberalised and on some issues diversified. Yet decline set in at a point when *conservative* reforms were introduced into an already liberalised church. As I argued in chapter four, St Michael’s has developed a method for managing its internal diversity by controlling public utterance and evading issues likely to cause fracture. Moreover, issues most likely to mobilise discontent appear to be those which invoke a turn to a more narrow or conservative approach to the faith.

What is more likely to have contributed to decline, is not the development of a liberalised, more tolerant set of beliefs as such, but the church’s accommodation to a particular target audience, i.e. mobile, middle class evangelicals. In this respect the development of a liberalised collection of beliefs needs to be analytically distinguished from an accommodating orientation towards a specific cultural grouping. While the two may go hand in hand, this is not necessarily the case, and as demonstrated earlier, liberalisation is inevitably filtered by local factors, which may allay as well as quicken trends in growth or decline.

If an adaptation to elective parochials has been instrumental in causing decline, then it is the church's fame which has been its undoing. Its reputation has secured a steady supply of students, visitors and mobile newcomers to the area, and it is in adapting to their needs that the church has adjusted the expectations it has of its members. As it has tempered its demands and accepted the legitimacy of a more attenuated commitment, so membership has fallen, with some participants preferring to attend a series of churches rather than commit to a single one.

Of course, there may be other salient factors at play, particularly to do with the local religious economy. Because of its long-term success and the way in which its reputation and attendance levels tower above those of its ecclesiastical neighbours, the status of St Michael's is not contested. If it was, or had to contend with a significant presence of New Age spirituality or other faith communities in its locality, then it might have responded by affirming harder group boundaries. Conversely, it might have liberalised more rapidly and more extensively. But it would be pure speculation to suggest that either of these responses would have necessarily engendered decline or growth.

The decline of the *Visions* group has proceeded from a different set of factors, not least its *avant garde* style, which alienates some, its refusal to openly evangelise for ideological reasons, and the way in which its closed subculture precludes any effective means of socialising many new members into the group. The lack of teaching in services also frustrates some occasional attendees, its appeal mainly attracting those feeling marginalised from mainstream evangelicalism rather than those who remain within it.

But aside from these interactive peculiarities, there are other, more mundane factors which affect the capacity of *Visions* to draw in more new members. Contrary to expectations, existing within the organisational remit of St Michael's does not always help. While groups of interested students occasionally attend, curious after reading an advertisement in the St Michael's newsletter or flier at an *Alpha* course, the leadership rarely even mention *Visions* publicly, let alone promote their services before the congregation. It is unclear whether this is down to administrative oversight, lack of communication between the two groups or a deliberate act of censorship. My conversations with church leaders suggested that the latter possibility is unlikely. But the effects are obvious. Many newcomers within the body of St Michael's are entirely unaware of the *Visions* group and what it offers, and more long-term members are not made aware of fresh *Visions* initiatives when they arise. In addition to this, *Visions* services tend to overlap with the St Michael's evening service, the most charismatic and most popular of the three. Regulars are generally reluctant to give up their weekly 'celebration' – joined by many of their friends – to attend a far less expressive, more meditative service with fewer participants.

In a very real sense, then, success has bred success, while those on the margins are perhaps destined to stay there. In a very deep sense *Visions* do not seek expansion but wish to remain at the cutting edge of church culture, and they have largely succeeded. But the price of being bohemian is a short shelf-life, and *Visions* may have to relinquish its mission in order to survive, or else fold in the near future. And at least one elective parochial who passed through its membership around the turn of the millennium would be very sad to see that happen.

APPENDIX A THE PRAGMATICS OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The bulk of the research upon which this thesis is based was conducted as ethnographic fieldwork over a twelve month period during 1999-2000. For a large part of this time I was resident in the locality of St Michael's. Numerous visits were made subsequent to this exercise, in order to supplement the data and explore unresolved issues.

Immersion and Observation

Penny Becker has argued that worship and religious education are the “keys to reproducing a religious tradition” (Becker, 1999: 55). As I was interested in the ongoing ‘tradition’ of St Michael's, the most obvious initial focus of my observation was the Sunday service, or in this case, the four Sunday services. Worship had also been the basis of my initial interest in the church, during my provisional visits to the field, and I wished to develop my emerging impressions. I began attending services as soon as I moved to York. I attended all three services at St Michael's – at 9.15, 11am and 7pm – as well as the *Visions* services later in the evening. Sometimes the two evening services clashed and I either left the St Michael's services early or else spent the whole evening assisting the *Visions* group in the preparation and set-up of their own service. Soon into fieldwork, I discovered that time before and after services was just as important as the services themselves. The coffee sessions in the church hall on Sunday mornings were an especially fruitful source of data and a useful context through which to make new contacts.

In addition to Sunday worship, I regularly attended the recently established mid-week service, an entire *Alpha* course and a series of home group meetings. I also made an effort to attend as many occasional church meetings as I practically could, including the monthly church prayer meeting. As the *Visions* group held their own home group meetings each week, I also attended these whenever possible. Indeed, the way in which these meetings were used for a variety of purposes – from service planning, to prayer, to socialising – enabled me to achieve a perspective on the group from a series of different angles.

I made an effort to engage in conversation with as many people as I possibly could, while also attempting to remain aloof enough not to be seen to be an intrusive presence. I was intent on treading softly and listening carefully (Warner, 1988: 69), in order to gain a fair picture of the culture of the congregation. But in addition to this, I found myself learning a great deal through *physical participation*. Drawing from Bourdieu (1977), Judith Okely notes how the body can be a site of learning in the field, and that we acquire knowledge through practical labour (Okely, 1992: 16-17). In reflecting upon the extent and character of my practical engagement in church events, I was able to draw inferences about my acceptance, subjectivity and about the demands of participation made upon regular members.

It was my intention to observe the congregation – or more accurately *congregations* - of St Michael's in as many different contexts as possible. This approach was grounded in my desire to question how the expression of religious identity is conditioned by contextual factors. In this way I aimed to move beyond many recent studies of Christianity in the UK, which rely on singular forms of data, or upon secondary

sources rather than primary observation. Adopting a multi-contextual focus meant that much of my 'data' was gleaned from informal conversations with congregational members. These took place after church services and at social occasions to which I was increasingly invited as I became more familiar to the congregation. They proved to be an invaluable resource of information not only on current trends, but also on the past history of the church since its evangelical revival during the 1960s.

Note-taking

I typically took notes privately, following each meeting or significant encounter, in order to maintain some sensitivity towards informants and so that my presence remained as unobtrusive as possible. I would sometimes make hand-written notes at the earliest opportunity, but most notes would be made at my computer back at the house. In addition to this, I kept a regular field journal, recording more personal reflections and ideas, which eventually ran to four volumes. At first I attempted to record everything, from the layout of the church to the style of dress of church leaders, but later focussed more on dialogue as I became accustomed to the physical aspects of the church buildings and as I learned to recognise names and people. I maintained this strategy throughout the fieldwork period, and although my note-taking improved over this time, it still proved a demanding and exhausting exercise. This approach was particularly taxing on my memory, and conversations with congregants soon became experiences of significant mental labour, as I simultaneously attempted to achieve meaningful communication, probe for interesting angles, and memorise items that might constitute useful data. I soon learned that I could only take on two substantial meetings each day, as each required intense concentration and an extended period of recollection and note-taking afterwards.

Although recording conversations in this unobtrusive manner remained a challenge throughout the fieldwork, capturing the subtleties of church services was made less problematic because of helpful assistance from the church leaders. The St Michael's office produce official orders of service – including lists of songs, Bible readings and details of role allocation – for the benefit of service leaders. A couple of weeks into my fieldwork, the church co-ordinator offered to post a copy of the order for each service to me in advance each week. In addition to this, each evening service sermon given at St Michael's is tape recorded and maintained in a library, for the benefit of congregants who might have missed the service but who would like to benefit from the teaching. I made a note of each sermon that was particularly illuminating and the church office kindly sent me copies.

My store of observational data rapidly grew and I was able to follow up areas of interest by continually reviewing my notes and field journals. However, I soon became aware of the need to conduct formal, recorded interviews. My impromptu note-taking was a useful strategy, and had the advantage of remaining relatively unobtrusive, but I was unable to generate quotable data in this way. I was becoming increasingly intrigued by the differences in styles of spoken discourse sustained by the members of St Michael's on the one hand, and by the *Visions* group on the other, but had no way of exploring this. I was also becoming aware of the often disorderly way in which conversations were developing. Although I could direct responses with my questions, an interview context would be far more suited to the gathering of issue-specific data.

Interviews

I began to interview congregants in early December, 1999, approaching people informally at first, and often only requesting a formal, recorded interview after initial meetings had helped me establish a rapport with the individual in question. I was faced with a difficult issue of sampling: how could I go about selecting appropriate people for interview within such a large and diverse church? My sample of interviewees would, for practical reasons, be inevitably small, perhaps 25 or 30 people at the most. This amounted to a mere 3% of the entire congregational body. I was conscious that I could easily be faced with an unrepresentative sample, expressing a minority position on key issues, and consequently misconstrue the attitudes of the congregation in so far as they could be presented as a generic whole. I attempted to overcome this problem by making a selection of potential interviewees that reflected the largest variety of spiritual style, church background, service preference and age group that I could possibly identify. This process was of course contingent upon my knowledge of the congregation, and in some ways reflected the friendship networks that I had established in the field. But this was an insurmountable bias, and my familiarity with these people was necessary if this sample was to be authentically representative of the diversity of the congregation. Familiarity was also necessary for a sense of mutual trust and for a genuinely 'naturalistic' rapport. In order to gain sufficient comparative purchase on *Visions*, 14 of the interviewees selected had connections with the group. These included 3 peripheral members, one former member who had re-entered St Michael's and a former counsellor for St Michael's who now acts as a spiritual guide for the group. I also interviewed several of the church leaders, including the vicar, associate minister, curate and one of the lay readers.

By the conclusion of the fieldwork period, I had had informal conversations in and around church events with over one hundred members of the congregation. I had also conducted a total of 33 formal interviews, 12 with women and 21 with men. This gender bias was not intentional, although several interviewees were members of the church staff or leadership, which was male dominated. 18 of these were recorded on a Dictaphone, subject to prior consent, and were transcribed after the fieldwork period had elapsed. The remainder were recorded in note form, either during or after the interview had taken place. This was not generally because of any reluctance on the part of the interviewee, but was due to other factors, usually because sensitive subjects were being addressed, in which case the Dictaphone was felt to be inappropriate.

Interviews took place in a variety of locations. I attempted to conduct as many as possible in the homes of interviewees, in order to gain some appreciation of their attitudes and life style as expressed in their home life. Where this was not offered, I would agree to whichever location was suggested, often a local café, pub or, for some, my own house in York. Interviews varied considerably in length – the shortest was little more than 30 minutes, the longest was well over 2 hours. Topics addressed also varied, although I did have a series of issues that I felt needed to be addressed each time, in accordance with the emerging key questions of the project. The following series of questions was used as a basic framework. Because of time constraints, not all of the questions were always covered, and some failed to elicit much of a response. I have highlighted those questions which were prioritised in bold type.

St Michael's: Interview Framework

1. General themes/background:

Tell me a little bit about your life history.

How did you come to faith?

How did you come to be involved in St Michael's? What is your Christian background?

What do you like most about being a part of St Michael's?

What, to you, have been the most significant changes in St Michael's since you arrived?

What do you think it means to be a Christian? How are we saved?

What will happen to those who are not Christians/not saved?

2. The Bible:

What role does the Bible play in your life?

Is the whole of the Bible to be taken as absolutely true?

How do you deal with conflicts or contradictions in the Bible? Does it contradict the findings of science [evolution?] and if so, how do you deal with this?

What do you struggle with most when reading the Bible?

Can God be found outside of the Biblical texts?

3. Worship:

What do you like most about the St Michael's services? When do you feel closest to God?

What is good worship? When does worship become problematic?

What is your view of the worship that occurs at *Visions*?

Do you find the use of charismatic gifts such as tongues or prophecy helpful? If so, how? If not, why not?

4. The World:

What do you think is the most serious problem in the world at the moment?

What is the place of the Christian within our wider culture?

Do you think the church relates well to our wider culture?

5. Morality:

Where, or to whom, do you first turn for moral guidance?

Is it necessary to be a Christian to be a moral person?

Do Christians have political and moral responsibilities as well as spiritual ones? What are they?

What does the word 'evil' describe to you? Where does evil come from?

6. The Church:

In what sense do you consider yourself to be a member of the church?

What is the biggest problem within the church at the present time?

How do you think St Michael's could change for the better in the future?

What do you think poses the biggest threat to the church today?

An adjusted version of this framework was applied to interviewees from the *Visions* group.

Visions: Interview Framework

1. General themes/background:

Tell me a little bit about your life history.

How did you come to faith/become a Christian?

How did you come to be involved in *Visions*? What is your Christian background?

How has becoming involved in *Visions* changed your life?

What do you like most about being a part of Visions?

What, to you, have been the most significant changes in St Michael's since you arrived? What have been the most significant changes in *Visions* since you arrived?

What do you think it means to be a Christian? How are we saved?

What will happen to those who are not Christians/not saved?

2. The Bible:

What role does the Bible play in your life?

Is the whole of the Bible to be taken as absolutely true?

How do you deal with conflicts or contradictions in the Bible? Does it contradict the findings of science [evolution?] and if so, how do you deal with this?

What do you struggle with most when reading the Bible?

Can God be found outside of the Biblical texts? If so, where? [what about other religions?]

3. Worship:

What do you like most about the *Visions* services? When do you feel closest to God?

What is good worship? When does worship become problematic?

What is your view of the worship that occurs at St Michael's?

Do you find the use of charismatic gifts such as tongues or prophecy helpful? If so, how? If not, why not?

4. The World:

What do you think is the most serious problem in the world at the moment?

What is the place of the Christian within our wider culture?

Do you think the church relates well to our wider culture?

5. Morality:

Where, or to whom, do you first turn for moral guidance?

Is it necessary to be a Christian to be a moral person?

Do Christians have political and moral responsibilities as well as spiritual ones?

What are they?

What does the word 'evil' describe to you? Where does evil come from?

6. The Church:

In what sense do you consider yourself to be a member of the church?

How do you think *Visions* stands in relation to St Michael's, and to the rest of the church?

What is the biggest problem within the church at the present time?

How do you think St Michael's/*Visions* could change for the better in the future?

What do you think poses the biggest threat to the church today?

While these frameworks served their purpose, i.e. to focus the interviews on a series of key questions, some interviewees clearly had their own sense of what were the important issues. This produced data on a multitude of topics, and all respondents were keen to include lengthy accounts of the history of St Michael's, particularly in relation to changes in clergy, and were also elaborate in their personal testimonies. In this respect their deviations from the interview structure produced useful data, and I did not attempt to steer the conversation back around to my own questions on these occasions. I also made sure I questioned each interviewee on their perceptions of the relationship between St Michael's and *Visions*. Interviews were transcribed and then used alongside other forms of data in the analysis of patterns of value within both groups.

Document Resources

As fieldwork progressed, and I became more and more aware of the rich history of St Michael-le-Belfrey, I also learned of the extensive collection of printed documents which could provide important insights into the life of the church. The church office were unending in their assistance in this respect, and I made repeated visits to pick up copies of internal reports, statistical data, attendance figures, address lists and numerous other invaluable resources. The *Visions* group had also kept an extensive file of notes and reports relating to their own activities over the years, and kindly allowed me to photocopy this in its entirety. I also used church documents to build up a demographic profile of the church as a whole. Further data on the rise and fall in attendance levels was provided in archive form by the Borthwick Institute of the University of York, and I was also allowed to note down recent figures in the current service register.

Ethics

It is a testimony to the confidence of St Michael's as a church that I was allowed free access to most meetings. Similarly, few members expressed any discomfort with my being among them and no sense of suspicion was directed at my work. Even so, throughout the fieldwork period and in subsequent work, I have made the utmost effort to respect the ongoing life of the church and the privacy of church members. I secured permission from the vicar and church co-ordinator before embarking on the study, and discussed my findings with them whenever possible. They were also given prior copies of the questionnaire for purposes of consent and feedback. As a means of sharing my findings, I also compiled a summary of questionnaire data for use by the church leadership.

I remained completely open during the research period about my intentions as a researcher, though this was confided in informal conversation. I did not announce my plans to the congregation because I wished to engage the trust of individuals on a face-to-face basis and the church leadership expressed no desire for me make an announcement of this kind.

It was decided that the church would be named for several reasons. First, St Michael's being such a well-known church, to disguise the church but not its location would be futile. And to disguise its location would preclude the discussion of factors of context. Second, to disguise the church would rule out any presentation of crucial historical factors which are necessary to any account of the church's growth and development. Thirdly, the St Michael's congregation itself – both leaders and parishioners – expressed no discomfort whatsoever with the notion of their church being named. Indeed, their sense of pride and evangelistic passion meant that many would be disappointed if it were not. However, the names of individuals – excepting the vicar and former clergy – have all been changed in order to protect their privacy. Moreover, when I have been privy to confidential information I have kept it so.

APPENDIX B THE QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

The survey was administered in May 2000, to a sample of the congregation. The aim of the survey was to explore the religious and moral values of the community, the Christian background of members, and the active expression of Christian belief within the context of behaviour and church involvement. The desired outcome was a general portrait of the community and of the value differences within it. Strong claims about the community are not based on the survey data alone, but are informed by the survey, as it has been interpreted in the light of qualitative data gathered during the fieldwork period. In this way I follow Peter Berger's comment that quantitative methods have a role, "as long as they are used to clarify the meanings operative in the situation being studied." (quoted in Wuthnow *et al*, 1984: 74)

The Scale of the Questionnaire

The aim of the questionnaire was to arrive at a representative picture of the St Michael-le-Belfrey community. This was achieved by taking a sample of the community and targeting them as survey respondents. The leadership of the church agreed to finance the printing of two hundred questionnaires, approximately one quarter of the total community. As I was unable to finance the printing of any larger number, or deal with the processing of a larger sample of data, the target sample was set at two hundred.

Selecting the Sample

The sample was based on the address list of the church. Long standing attendees are already on this list, and newcomers are invited, at each service, to fill in a 'welcome

card' should they wish to make St Michael's their home church. Those who fill in the form are then added to the address list. The address list is distributed to all those included on it each year, and lists names alphabetically, also providing a postal address and contact telephone number for each individual. Consequently, the gender distribution of the community can be gleaned from this list. In order to get a more detailed picture of the demographic spread of the community, I asked three independent, long-standing members to look through the list with me, including the church co-ordinator, providing the approximate age and occupation of each person on the list. Around 95% of the people on the list were fully accounted for. In addition, these church members were able to point out the occasional instance where people had been left on the list when in fact they had left St Michael's. After adjusting the address list accordingly, I was able to piece together a reasonably accurate picture of the community, according to factors of gender, age and social class (gauged according to occupation).

Once the list had been adjusted in the light of recent departures, it ran to a total of 738 names. Although some teenagers are listed, the general policy is to include only adults on the list. (Young children and youths are included instead on the youth groups prayer list, also distributed annually). On the basis of the age and gender distribution of the congregation (summarised in chapter three), a stratified random sample of names was selected from the address list. Certain individuals on the list had to be excluded from the sample. These individuals fell into one of two groups: first, those individuals who belong to the *Visions* group, that I originally intended to survey as a separate community at later date, using an adjusted version of the questionnaire; second, a group of thirty individuals who had recently been targeted as respondents

for an internally distributed questionnaire on church growth. I was advised by the leadership that any attempt to approach these individuals for a second time could be seen as pastorally insensitive. Consequently, when any of these names was selected randomly, I passed over them in favour of the following randomly selected name.

Distribution and Collection

The questionnaires were sealed together with a covering letter and an addressed return envelope. They were individually labelled and left for parishioners to pick up from their pigeon holes in the church narthex on Sunday, 28th May, 2000. Respondents were informed in the enclosed instructions to either take completed questionnaires to the church office, or alternatively place them in a marked box situated in the narthex of the church. The questionnaires were left in the pigeon holes for a period of four weeks. At this point, the remaining questionnaires were kindly posted on directly to respondents by the church co-ordinator.

I kept in touch with the church co-ordinator over the summer months in order to gauge the gradual return of the questionnaires. By mid August, at which point it appeared that a peak response level had been achieved, I returned to York to collect the completed questionnaires. A total of 67 had been returned, amounting to a 34% response rate.

The gender distribution of the collected sample was males – 36%, females – 60%, while 4.5% gave no answer. Fortunately, this showed no significant divergence from the 60:40 divide suggested by the church address list. The age distribution of the return sample was less in line with congregational trends, with the ‘20s’ cohort

particularly under-represented and the 70s+ category over represented. This may have been because some students were not attending church so regularly during their exam period, or perhaps could not find time to complete the questionnaire. Whatever the reason, it was subsequently impossible to make specific claims about the '20s' age group. In the subsequent analysis, age cohorts were grouped together in order that statistically significant claims could be made (see chapters four and five).

The survey data was dealt with in two ways. Quantifiable data was inputted into the SPSS program and frequency and cross-tabulation analysis was used to explore patterns in member attitudes. Discursive data was analysed separately, but still in conjunction with individual profiles. A copy of the questionnaire is provided at the end of this appendix.

Why the Visions Group were not also surveyed

It was my original intention to use a postal questionnaire to survey the *Visions* group. This would have used similar questions to the St Michael's questionnaire, for comparative purposes, but would also have included questions of specific interest. Subsequently, I decided not to survey the group, for several reasons. First, by the time I left the field, I already had a vast amount of data on the group, and many of the issues addressed in the questionnaire had been explored with individual *Visions* members through informal conversation and interviews. Second, part of the reason for administering the St Michael's questionnaire amounted to an attempt to deal with the size of the congregation. This was not an issue with the *Visions* group, and I had got to know most of its ten or so core members fairly well during my stay in the field. Third, and most importantly, following my departure, the *Visions* group entered a difficult

phase in its development. Several members who had been involved since its inception left the group to live in areas closer to new jobs. With the group showing few signs of recruiting new committed members, numbers were seriously depleted. This was a sensitive time for *Visions*, and certain indications suggested that further interference from distanced outsiders, including myself, would only exacerbate existing frustrations. It was consequently out of respect and sensitivity to the group – whose efforts and time were already stretched to the limit – that I decided not to ask them to complete survey questionnaires.

The Life of St Michael-le-Belfrey Questionnaire for Parishioners

The following questions are concerned with your own life, values and beliefs. Please answer each question as best you can and as honestly as you can. There are no right or wrong answers. *You are not asked to give your name, all of the information that you provide will be treated anonymously.*

Please answer every question, unless indicated to do otherwise. Most of the questions require you to put a circle or a tick in the appropriate space or bracket. When questions offer a series of possible answers, please read the list through before filling in your own answer. A few questions ask you to answer in your own words – please use the spaces provided for this.

Once you have completed the questionnaire, please seal it in the enclosed envelope and either forward it to**** ***, at the St Cuthbert's Centre, Peasholme Green, or leave it in the church narthex in the box marked 'Lancaster Questionnaires'.

Many thanks for taking the time to fill in the questionnaire. The information you provide will help enhance our understanding of the St Michael-le-Belfrey community and will hopefully contribute to the well being of the church in the future.

General personal information:

Q1 Gender: Male Female (please circle as appropriate)

Q2 Age: 0-18 19-21 22-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69 70+

Q3 What is your present employment status? (please tick one)

1. Working full-time ()
2. Working part-time ()
3. Unemployed/looking for work ()
4. Not working because of illness ()
5. Retired ()
6. In full-time education ()
7. Keeping house ()

Q4 If you answered 1 or 2 to the above, what is your occupation?

Q5 Which of the following levels of formal education have you completed (please **tick all that apply to you**)?

1. GCSEs/ 'O' levels. ()
2. 'A' levels. ()
3. University Degree. ()
4. Postgraduate Degree. ()
5. Vocational qualification. ()

Q6 Have you received any post-school religious/Christian education (e.g. a course at Bible College)? If you have, please specify the course and where you studied (otherwise, leave this space blank):

Your Christian life – History:

Q7 Which churches have you attended regularly over the course of your lifetime? (please give the type of church and the relevant dates, e.g. Methodist 1980-85, Anglican 1986-present)

Q8 When you were a child, what type of church, if any, did your parents attend?

Q9 Would you describe this church as an **evangelical** church?

Yes No Don't know (please circle as appropriate)

Q10 How important would you say religion was in your family while you were growing up? (please tick one)

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----|
| 1. Very important | () |
| 2. Somewhat important | () |
| 3. Not very important | () |
| 4. Not at all important | () |
| 5. Don't know | () |

Your Christian life – York:

Q11 How long have you lived in York? (please circle as appropriate)

0-1 year 1-5 years 5-10 years 10-20 years 20+ years

Q12 How long have you regularly attended St Michael le Belfrey?

0-1 year 1-5 years 5-10 years 10-20 years 20+ years

Q13 For what reasons did you first decide to come to St Michael's?

Q14 What were your first impressions?

Q15 Why do you now attend St Michael's (rather than any other church)?

Q16 Which other members of your immediate family also regularly attend St Michael's?

Q17 Think for a moment of your five closest friends (outside your family) – how many regularly attend St Michael’s?

Q18 How many of these five friends would you consider to be committed Christians?
.....

Q19 Do you live in the centre of York? Yes No (please circle)

Q20 If not, then approximately how far do you live away from the St Michael le Belfrey church building? (please circle as appropriate)

1-2 miles 2-5 miles 5-10 miles 10-20 miles More than 20 miles

Your Christian life – Coming to Faith:

Q21 Which of the following statements comes closest to how **you** would describe **your** coming to faith? (please tick one)

1. I have always been a Christian and, although my faith has changed and developed over the years, I have always had Christian faith as long as I can remember.()
2. Although I can recall a time when I was not a Christian, my faith has developed gradually and I cannot pinpoint a specific event at which I became a Christian. ()
3. I experienced a definite turning point in my life when I was born again. My life suddenly changed from one state to another and I began to follow Christ. ()

Q22 **If you answered 3 to Q21**, at what age did you have this ‘born again’ experience?.....

Q23 Have you been baptised? Yes No (circle one)

Q24 If you have been baptised, were you baptised as an infant or as an adult?

infant adult (please circle one)

Q25 Have you been confirmed as a member of the Church of England? Yes No

Q26 If you have been confirmed, at what age were you confirmed?.....

Q27 If there is one experience that has been most significant to you in your life as a Christian, please describe it.

Your Christian life in York – Practice:

Q28 Which St Michael's services do you regularly attend? (tick whichever options apply to you)

1. 9.15 service ()
2. Family service ()
3. Evening service ()
4. *Visions* ()
5. Midweek service ()
6. Monthly prayer meeting ()

Q29 Have you **ever** attended a *Visions* event or service? (circle whichever applies)
Yes / No

Q30 If you have not attended a *Visions* event or service, then why not?

Q31 If you have attended a *Visions* event at some point, then which one/s? (tick whichever options apply to you)

1. *Visions* Communion ()
2. *Visions* Labyrinth ()
3. *Visions* Dance Service ()
4. Another occasional event (e.g. *Visions* Easter service) ()

Q32 What were your impressions of this event?

Q33 Why do you not **regularly** attend the *Visions* services?

Q34 Whether you have attended or not, which of the following descriptions comes closest to your impressions of the *Visions* group?

1. Celtic Christian ()
2. High Anglican ()
3. New Age ()
4. Evangelical ()
5. Don't Know ()
6. Other?.....

Q35 If you regularly attend another church in addition to St Michael's, which is it? (give the name of the church, its denomination and its location)

Q36 **Not considering your time in church on a Sunday**, how often do you do the following? (please tick one option for each activity)

	Daily	Few times a week	Weekly	Occasionally	Never
1. Read the Bible	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. Pray alone	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. Pray in a group	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4. Read Christian literature	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5. Discuss religious matters with friends	<input type="checkbox"/>				
6. Watch religious TV programs	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Q37 Which of the following authors have you read at some point in your life?

1. C.S Lewis
2. David Watson
3. John Stott
4. Louise Hay
5. Norman Vincent Peale
6. Alistair McGrath
7. Scott Peck
8. John Wimber
9. Dave Tomlinson

Q38 **Apart from the Bible**, is there any other one author or book that has had a significant influence upon your life as a Christian? If so, then please name them/it.

Q39 How do you feel about the use of charismatic gifts (e.g. speaking/singing in tongues, words from God, etc.) in church services? (please tick whichever **one** option is appropriate)

1. They are an essential part of worship
2. They are helpful for some people but unhelpful for others
3. They are an unnecessary feature of worship.

Q40 Here are a few descriptions of religious experiences. For each one, please indicate how often you have the experience: (tick one option for each experience)

	Often	A few times	Once	Never
1. Receive a vision from God	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Speak in tongues in church	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Speak in tongues privately	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Receive a word of knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Pray for others by laying on of hands	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Are prayed for by laying on of hands	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Have been miraculously healed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Witnessed a miraculous healing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q41 When seeking guidance about important matters, to where do you first turn? (please tick one)

1. The scriptures
2. Christian literature
3. Other Christians
4. Your home group leader
5. The vicar or another figure
in Christian leadership
6. Your parents
7. Your friends
8. The Holy Spirit
9. Nature

Q42 Have you ever attended the *Alpha* course? Yes No (please circle one)

Q43 If you have attended the *Alpha* course, in what capacity did you attend? (please circle one)

As a leader

as a Christian helper

as a participant

Q44 What were your impressions of the *Alpha* course?

Q45 Think of the activities, connected to St Michael's, that you are involved in **at the moment**. Which of the following categories of involvement apply to you? Tick according to which activities you are involved in **now**, and then according to which you have been involved in **at some point in the past**.

- | | Now | In the past |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Church service organisation (e.g. service planning, PA, worship band, choir) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. St Michael's government (PCC) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Wider church government (e.g. deanery synod) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Home group | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Alpha course/Alpha link | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Spurriergate Centre | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Riding Lights | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Youth/children's Groups | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Ministry Team | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q46 Think of your life in St Michael's. Within this context, have you **ever** done any of the following?

- | | Yes | No | d/k |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Given a reading in a church service | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Led a home group meeting | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Given a talk at an <i>Alpha</i> meeting | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Invited a friend to attend a service | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Been responsible for someone new joining St Michael's | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Approached a church leader for advice | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q47 To what extent do the following activities help you in your spiritual life? (always helpful/sometimes helpful/rarely helpful/never helpful)

- | | Always | Sometimes | Rarely | Never |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Teaching in church sermons | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Being prayed for by the Ministry team in church | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Learning from the Bible in small groups of Christians | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Sung worship in services | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Participating in the liturgy in church | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Reading the Bible alone | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Praying alone | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q48 When making important decisions in life, to what extent do you base these decisions on your Christian faith? (please tick one of the following)

1. I seldom if ever base such decisions on Christian faith
2. I sometimes base such decisions on my Christian faith but definitely not most of the time
3. I feel that most of my important decisions are based on my Christian faith, but usually in a general, unconscious way
4. I feel that most of my important decisions are based on my Christian faith, and I usually consciously attempt to make them so

Q49 Which of the following types of organisation do you have regular involvement/contact with? (please tick whichever apply)

1. Political parties (e.g. the Labour party)
2. Environmental Organisations (e.g. Greenpeace)
3. Christian festivals (e.g. Spring Harvest, Greenbelt)
4. Christian charities (e.g. Christian Aid)
5. Non-Christian social justice/relief movements (e.g. Amnesty, Oxfam)

Q50 Consider how much money you give to St Michael's each month. Approximately what percentage of your gross income do you give (if married, please include your spouse's income in your gross income)?

1. Less than 1%
2. About 1-2%
3. About 3-5%
4. About 6-8%
5. About 9-10%
6. More than 10%

Q51 To which charities/charitable causes do also regularly give?

Beliefs and Values – Personal Theology:

Q52 As a Christian, which of the following comes closest to how you would describe yourself? (please tick one, or specify the preferred 'Other' term)

1. Anglican
2. Evangelical
3. Charismatic Evangelical
4. Post-Evangelical
5. Other (please specify).....

Q53 Consider your thoughts about Ultimate reality. Which of the following comes closest to your own belief? (please tick one)

1. There is a personal God
2. There is some sort of spirit or vital force which controls life
3. I am not sure that there is any sort of God of life force
4. I don't know what to think
5. I don't really think there is any sort of spirit/god or life force
6. Don't Know

Q54 Consider your thoughts about human nature. Which of the following statements comes closest to your own view? (please tick one)

1. Humankind is in a fallen state and is sinful by nature
2. Although humankind is sinful, there is much goodness in human nature
3. Humankind is basically good by nature

Q55 Think about how you view Jesus. Which of the following comes closest to your own view? (please tick one)

1. Jesus was God in human form
2. Jesus was a man sent by God for a specific purpose
3. Jesus was just a man who had a special relationship with God
4. Jesus was just a man who delivered wise moral teaching
5. Don't know/can't say

Q56 Consider your understanding of the Holy Spirit. Which of the following do you agree with/disagree with/don't know?

- | | Agree | Disagree | D/k |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Once a person is filled with the Holy Spirit for the first time it stays with them forever | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. If a person is genuinely filled with the Holy Spirit they will speak in tongues | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. The Holy Spirit can be discerned in all aspects of God's creation | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Whenever a person becomes a Christian, they are filled with the Holy Spirit | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. The Holy Spirit is a power that can be used by faithful Christians to perform miracles | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. The Holy Spirit is the ultimate source of all wisdom | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q57 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?
(strongly agree/agree/neither agree nor disagree/strongly disagree) (please tick one option for each statement)

	Agree Strongly	Agree	Neither	Disagree strongly
1. There is a God who concerns Himself with every human being personally	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. There is little that people can do to change the course of their lives	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. To me, life is meaningful only because God exists	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. In my opinion, life does not serve any purpose	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Life is only meaningful if you provide the meaning yourself	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. We each make our own fate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q58 Which of the following comes closest to your view of the scriptures? (please tick one)

1. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, not mistaken in its statements and teachings, and is to be taken literally, word for word
2. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, not mistaken in its teachings, but is not always to be taken literally in its statements concerning matters of science, historical reporting, etc.
3. The Bible becomes the Word of God for a person when he reads it in faith
4. The Bible is an ancient book of legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men.

Q59 Which of the following comes closest to your view of salvation? (please tick one)

1. Only those who openly confess their faith in Jesus as their personal saviour will be saved
2. Only those that have lived in accordance with the teachings of Jesus will be saved
3. Only those who have been 'born again' will be saved
4. All those who have turned to some kind of spiritual life will be saved
5. All people will be saved
6. We cannot know for sure

Q60 In your view, what will happen to those who are not saved? (please tick one)

1. They will go to hell as a place of punishment
2. They will exist in hell as a state of separation from God
3. They will just die and not live on
4. They will get a chance to confess their faith before God after death
5. We cannot know for sure

Q61 Which of the following comes closest to your view of life after death? (please tick one)

1. Nothing happens, we come to the end of life ()
2. Our soul passes onto another world ()
3. Our bodies await resurrection ()
4. We come back as something or someone else ()
5. Trust in God – all is in God's hands ()
6. Don't Know ()

Q62 Which of the following comes closest to your own understanding of the Kingdom of God? (please tick one)

1. The Kingdom is here and now in the life of the church ()
2. The Kingdom will come when Christ returns ()
3. The Kingdom will come into being as a preparation for Christ's return ()
4. Don't know ()

Q63 What is your view of baptism? (please tick one)

1. People should be baptised as infants in order to enter the Christian church ()
2. People should only be baptised once they are old enough to make a conscious decision of faith ()
3. It does not matter when people are baptised, as long as they are at some point in their lives ()
4. Baptism is an optional course of action for Christians ()

Q64 Which of the following comes closest to your view of evil? (please tick one)

1. It is the work of an evil being called Satan ()
2. It is the harmful attitudes of man, influenced by Satan ()
3. It is the harmful attitudes of man ()
4. Don't know ()

Q65 Which of the following comes closest to your view of the devil? (please tick one)

1. He is a personal being who causes evil in the world ()
2. It is an impersonal force that influences people to do wrong ()
3. The devil does not exist ()
4. Don't know/Can't say ()

Q66 I would like to ask about your views on certain 'alternative' practices. Drawing from the list of responses given below (1–6), please circle the one that is most reflective of your view of each of the practices listed (A–J). In the far right column, also tick the practices in which you have been involved at some point in your life.

1. I am unaware of what this practice involves.
2. It can be a useful way of experiencing the spiritual realm.
3. There is a therapeutic/medical use for it.
4. It is harmless nonsense.
5. It is a fraudulent practice and can therefore be harmful to people.
6. It is an evil practice and should be avoided as it causes harm.

							Involvement?
A. Mediumship	1	2	3	4	5	6	()
B. Reading of Tarot Cards	1	2	3	4	5	6	()
C. Meditation	1	2	3	4	5	6	()
D. Crystal Therapy	1	2	3	4	5	6	()
E. Aromatherapy	1	2	3	4	5	6	()
F. Homeopathy	1	2	3	4	5	6	()
G. Spiritualism	1	2	3	4	5	6	()
H. New Age Religion	1	2	3	4	5	6	()
I. Acupuncture	1	2	3	4	5	6	()
J. Yoga	1	2	3	4	5	6	()
K. Witchcraft	1	2	3	4	5	6	()
L. Paganism	1	2	3	4	5	6	()

Q67 I would now like to ask about your views on different religions or religious groups. Drawing from the list of responses below (1-5), please circle which one is most reflective of your view of each of the religions listed.

1. It is an alternative path to the true God.
2. It does not lead to God but we must respect the traditions of others.
3. It is misguided, and those who follow them should be brought to the true faith.
4. It is the work of the devil and should be denounced.
5. I do not know.

A. Judaism	1	2	3	4	5
B. Islam	1	2	3	4	5
C. Buddhism	1	2	3	4	5
D. Hinduism	1	2	3	4	5
E. Mormonism	1	2	3	4	5
F. Jehovah's Witnesses	1	2	3	4	5
G. Seventh Day Adventists	1	2	3	4	5
H. Roman Catholics	1	2	3	4	5
I. Quakers	1	2	3	4	5

Q68 What are your views on the following? (always wrong/almost always wrong/don't know/sometimes wrong/not wrong at all).

	AW	AAW	DK	SW	NWAT
1. Homosexual relations between consenting adults	()	()	()	()	()
2. Adultery	()	()	()	()	()
3. Sex before marriage	()	()	()	()	()
4. Striking a child	()	()	()	()	()
5. Drinking to excess	()	()	()	()	()
6. Smoking	()	()	()	()	()
7. Lying to friends	()	()	()	()	()
8. Not attending church if one does not feel like it	()	()	()	()	()
9. Favouring Christians over non-Christians solely because of their faith	()	()	()	()	()
10. Smoking marijuana	()	()	()	()	()
11. Using profanity/swearing	()	()	()	()	()
12. Getting divorced	()	()	()	()	()
13. Having an abortion	()	()	()	()	()
14. Working on a Sunday	()	()	()	()	()
15. Gambling	()	()	()	()	()
16. Not paying one's income tax	()	()	()	()	()
17. Civil disobedience (e.g. trespassing while engaged in a civil rights protest)	()	()	()	()	()

Q69 Opinions vary about what a person should be or do in order to be a Christian. Which of the following statements reflects your own understanding? (please tick **all that apply** to your own opinion, e.g. if you believe a Christian is someone who has been baptised but who has also been filled with the Holy Spirit, tick 3 and 6.)

1. A Christian is someone who lives in a Christian country ()
2. A Christian is someone who has Christian parents ()
3. A Christian is someone who has been baptised ()
4. A Christian is someone who has been 'born again' ()
5. A Christian is someone who has faith in Jesus Christ as their personal saviour ()
6. A Christian is someone who has been filled with the Holy Spirit ()
7. A Christian is someone who follows the teachings of Jesus ()

Q70 Think of how you view the differences between men and women. Which of the following statements do you agree with/disagree with?

- | | Agree | Disagree | Don't know |
|---|-------|----------|------------|
| 1. The Bible teaches that women are subordinate to men | () | () | () |
| 3. Men and women are biologically structured for different roles | () | () | () |
| 3. Women should always obey their husbands | () | () | () |
| 4. All members of the clergy should be male | () | () | () |
| 4. The primary role of the Christian woman is to support her husband as provider by caring for the children and tending to the household duties | () | () | () |
| 5. Women should never occupy positions of leadership in a church | () | () | () |
| 6. Women should be given equal opportunities to men to serve the church in every respect. | () | () | () |

Beliefs and Values – Attitudes Towards Church Practice:

Q71 Which of the following statements comes closest to your impression of what sermons given in church **should** be like? (please tick one)

1. Spiritual instruction from preachers in authority, that we need to accept ()
2. Christian teaching from which we may draw and learn, but according to our own needs and values ()
3. Informative and reflective talks which may form the basis of further discussion about Christian truth and teaching ()

Q72 In general to what extent do you think the sermons at St Michael's adequately cover the following topics: (please circle one option for each topic)

Understanding the Bible	yes	no	d/k
Moral teaching	yes	no	d/k
Meaning of spiritual gifts	yes	no	d/k
Dealing with contemporary culture	yes	no	d/k
Current national issues	yes	no	d/k
Local concerns	yes	no	d/k

Beliefs and Values – The Wider Church:

Q73 Now I want to ask about your views on the church as a whole (i.e. not just St Michael's, but the universal church). Consider the following list of issues. Which of them do you think the church should speak out on?

	Yes	No	Don't know
1. Abortion	()	()	()
2. Extra marital affairs	()	()	()
3. Euthanasia	()	()	()
4. Homosexuality	()	()	()
5. Disarmament	()	()	()
6. Third World	()	()	()
7. Unemployment	()	()	()
8. Race	()	()	()
9. Ecology	()	()	()
10. Government Policy	()	()	()

Q74 In your opinion, how important should the following issues be as priorities for all Christians? (very important/important/don't know/not very important/irrelevant) (please tick one for each option)

	Very Important	Important	d/k	Not Very Important	Irrelevant
1. Helping provide food and shelter for the homeless and poor	()	()	()	()	()
2. Contributing to the welfare of the local community	()	()	()	()	()
3. Telling neighbours and colleagues about Jesus	()	()	()	()	()
4. Volunteering time and/or giving money to political causes	()	()	()	()	()
5. Reading the Bible	()	()	()	()	()
6. Raising money for worthy charitable causes	()	()	()	()	()
7. Contributing to the organisational life of their own church	()	()	()	()	()
8. Providing a moral example for others	()	()	()	()	()
9. Thinking through the Gospel message in order to relate it to their own culture and personal situation	()	()	()	()	()

.....

Q75 Some people claim that life is basically spiritual. How would you respond to this? (please continue overleaf if necessary)

Many thanks indeed for your kind assistance in filling in this questionnaire.

APPENDIX C: THE *VISIONS* SUNG CREED

The following creed was composed by Rebecca Wilson in response to the suggestion that the group have a public statement of its beliefs and values. It is frequently performed to a pulsating back-beat at *Visions* dance services. It is not seen as replacing the Apostles' Creed, which is still spoken at communion services, but more as a group mission statement.

Sung Creed

I don't believe in apathy
 I don't believe in war
 I don't believe in bigotry
 Or homophobia
 I don't believe in sexism
 Or racism or hate
 I believe in the coming
 of a painless deathless State.

I don't believe in money
 And I don't believe in hype
 I don't believe an instant product
 Will make the world right
 I don't believe that taking pills
 Will bring you happiness.
 I don't believe to crush the poor
 will make you a success.

I believe in God
 I believe in Christ who died to save us
 I believe in the Spirit's power
 The Life within all life.

I believe in God
 I believe in a passionate Creator
 I believe in Jesus
 Who's humanity Divine.

I believe in God
 I believe in the Planet of the Future
 I Believe in the coming
 of our Resurrected Life.

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